

THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF
ASIAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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RAJINI SRIKANTH is Professor of English at the University of Massachusetts Boston. She is the author of *Constructing the Enemy: Empathy/Antipathy in U.S. Literature and Law* and winner of the Association for Asian American Studies Cultural Studies Book Award for *The World Next Door: South Asian American Literature and the Idea of America*.

MIN HYOUNG SONG is Professor of English at Boston College. He is the author of *Strange Future: Pessimism and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots* and *The Children of 1965: On Writing and Not Writing as an Asian American*, which won the Association for Asian American Studies Literary Criticism Book Award, the Alpha Sigma Nu Book Award for Literature and Fine Arts, and honorable mention in the Association for the Study of the Arts in the Present Book Prize.

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ASIAN AMERICAN
LITERATURE

★

Edited by

RAJINI SRIKANTH

MIN HYOUNG SONG



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Introduction

RAJINI SRIKANTH AND MIN HYOUNG SONG

Beginning in the eighteenth century, Asians in America have been considered abstract representatives of a faraway and exotic civilization, bodies supplying labor, a corrupting presence, an unwelcome “invasion,” and, when their numbers increased, a peril.¹ As a result of this discursive history, many writers, artists, and activists have had to invest much effort in making manifest the alternative figure of the Asian American as a complex being with multidimensional motivations and histories that resist simplistic understanding. Asian Americans are, in this counterdiscourse, an assemblage of diverse geographies, journeys, and experiences. The term *Asian American* at the time of its provenance referred to Asians within the United States. Today, the field of Asian American literary studies draws on a wider terrain than just the United States. “Americans” refers to the Americas, a vast region including Latin America and Canada.² The field works, as well, with a more complex understanding of “Asian,” its referents spanning more than the countries of China, Japan, Korea, and the Philippines. The field of Asian American literary studies uses the term *literature* in a generous way, to think about the complex array of expressive modes many Americans of Asian ancestry have adopted to give form to their lived experiences, disappointments, and aspirations.

This literary history raises the following questions: What pressures does the birth of a novel racial and political consciousness bring to bear on established ways of communicating ideas, expressing values, and conjuring beauty? How might an emergent literature alter our ideas about what should count as literary? In what ways might such a literature have to come up with its own traditions, and, in the process, set itself up as a distinct set of literary texts with its own sets of conventions and prescriptions? The payoff for assaying such questions is a renewed sense of the literary borne out of a constant interrogation and examination of forms of articulation, and a simultaneous embrace of craft and context. Such an approach to literary study that privileges both aesthetics *and* context is made necessary by the ways in which Asian

American literature arose as a creative endeavor out of a specific generative moment. The current historical moment is particularly appropriate for a history of Asian American literature. The writings are abundant, the field of Asian American literary studies is robust and vibrant, and there is a clear sense of an aesthetic trajectory covering more than one hundred years.

A literary history is different from a history of events, or ideas, or institutions. The focus of a literary history is on the ways in which literary works build upon each other in deep communication: formal innovations and codifications of convention inspiring further innovation and codification; mediums, modes, genres, and subgenres dancing into and out of existence as each generation of writers and the masters of each generation leave their mark on what came before; a tracing of lines of development out of an otherwise vast and possibly incoherent mass of writings that suggest rationales for the choices authors make; and an examination of the equally immense body of scholarly writings that have sought to illuminate, make sense of, order, and even prescribe what we think of as worthy of aesthetic appreciation. This is an incomplete listing of the tasks that a literary history can assign itself. What is common to all of these efforts is the sense that the “literary” has an internal reason that might be in communion with the social (in which we include the political, cultural, and economic) but is also separate from it. They are two worlds.

The space between literary and social worlds grows thin, and the two worlds may even intimately intrude upon each other, when what becomes identified as literature is inextricably linked with a political context. Such is the case with Asian American literature, which has unavoidable political origins and makes only incomplete sense without an understanding of these extraliterary beginnings. The category “Asian American” emerged from the social and political movements in the United States of the late 1960s and 1970s. Those involved in these energetic and robust struggles were individuals with ancestries from the countries of East Asia (China, Korea, and Japan) and the Philippines. Groups from Southeast Asia, South Asia, and West Asia – the Middle East – were later additions that vastly complicated and enriched the terrain of Asian American writing. The early Asian Americans (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Filipino/a) demanded full membership in the U.S. body politic and an acknowledgment of their many contributions to the country. One mode in which the men and women directly connected to these movements gave expression to their demands was literature. In doing so, many felt frustrated by the extant creative traditions available to them. Such traditions seemed unable to give shape to the concerns they were trying to explore, and,

in some instances, available literary conventions seemed to hinder and actively exclude the range of experiences they wished to illuminate. In response, these budding writers advocated for the invention of a different kind of literary tradition founded on a system of values that ran counter to what was dominant at the time. Asian American literature as we understand it today makes no sense without a broad appreciation of what came before this generative moment and what was – for some practitioners, problematically – made possible after.

More than other kinds of literature, Asian American literature's history demands attention to forces that lie beyond the boundaries of what we most typically consider as literary. The reason is that the central early innovators of this body of writing, the ones who gave us the category to work with in the first place, defined literature in a capacious manner to encompass not only the written word in its novelistic and poetic varieties but also as connected to music and theater. Always at the forefront of such a definition, and the reason for its elasticity of meaning, was the rejection of the aesthetic as a category solely preoccupied with its own formal brilliance. Art had to be about something else. It was supposed to do something in the social world. It served a purpose greater than itself. It was a companion to the political, not something that stood above and removed.

What made the idea of Asian American literature revolutionary – made it a rejection of the dominant thinking about literature at its time of invention – was precisely its refusal to view literature as a set of formal properties defined outside the flow of social concerns. Looking back at what has become of this legacy, Chris Iijima, the lead singer of an influential Asian American musical group called Yellow Pearl (or alternatively A Grain of Rice) and later in his life a law professor, observes: "Asian American culture is too often defined backwards. That is, we tend to define it in terms of what artists do – poets, playwrights, filmmakers, jazz musicians, actors, and graphic artists – rather than in terms of the collective and shared experience of people. I've always believed that artists, despite what they themselves believe, are really just reflections of the time."³ Similarly, in a deeply sensual paean to Asian American poetry where she compares the experience of reading a poem to the act of drinking and savoring a full-bodied wine, the poet and literary essayist Eileen Tabios offers excerpts from a range of Asian American poets – Arthur Sze, Marilyn Chin, Erik Chock, Janice Mirikitani, Meena Alexander, Vince Gotera, Mitsuye Yamada, and Christian Langworthy – and expertly intertwines a focus on aesthetics with social and political concerns. She writes, "[W]hen it comes to poetic form, the Asian American poet's concerns – to the extent that one understands that such factors as racism and objectification have afflicted Asian

America – might also lead to the rupturing of traditional poetic forms which predominate in the literary mainstream. I, for one, am interested in disrupting narrative in my poems as a result of exploring issues of colonialism and postcolonialism.”⁴ But, she also recognizes, because she is a poet, that “before poets come to write something that is later labeled ‘oppositional’ they may have intended something else, including simply trying to develop their craft.”⁵ This volume on the history of Asian American literature seeks to maintain the productive and rich tension between craft and context. We do not see them in opposition to one another or even in a relationship of asymmetrical power, but as equally valuable contenders for the writer’s and the reader’s attention.

For example, Julie Otsuka’s novel *When the Emperor was Divine* (2003) embodies the seamless melding of aesthetics and politics in Asian American literature. The mainstream reviews of the book laud her finely chiseled prose, likening it to an exquisitely cut gem or meticulously executed miniature, even as they acknowledge its subject matter, which is the highly political and historically fraught interlude in twentieth-century U.S. history of the Japanese American internment, or incarceration, as many scholars have started referring to this historic event. In a provocative essay on Otsuka’s novel, Tina Chen (a contributor to this volume) takes up the question of ethics in how we read or respond to this work. She asks whether it is ethical to read Otsuka’s use of generic identifiers – woman, girl, boy, and father – for the Japanese American family as a universalizing move to gesture to any group of people having to confront arbitrary displacement, loss of home, and removal of loved ones from families. In her argument she notes that though the bulk of the novel may be constructed as a universalizing move to erase “Japaneseness,” the author abandons this technique in the final chapter and forces the reader – through the use of the second-person mode of address “you” and a marked shift in tone – to respond to the father as a person of Japanese descent and to confront and engage his deep sense of betrayal and rage as he accuses the U.S. government and the American people of their racism against, and hostility toward, him.⁶

In organizing this history of Asian American literature, then, we have sought to foreground what is innovative about it by following the lead of historian Gary Okihiro. In *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture*, he advances the notion that it is Americans on the margins who challenge the nation to live up to its professed ideals. From this perspective, Asian Americans have from very early times demanded that the United States match practice to rhetoric. They have asserted their presence, performed their resistance, and articulated their complex experiences and longings. More than

a century of writings by Asian Americans have generated a richly textured body of literature worthy of analysis for complexity of form, range of thematic concerns, and undeniable contribution to the cultures of the United States. What makes these writings unique is the ways in which they hinge on the political.

Even as they challenge their relegation to the margins of U.S. history, politics, and culture, however, Asian American writers are not free from the tendency to draw boundaries of their own. Given that the beginnings of the Asian American movement in the late 1960s featured as its central players Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino Americans, these groups became the unquestioned members of the recently articulately political identity. Yet, ironically, as Michael Omi has pointed out, precisely at the moment when the immigrant landscape of the United States was being profoundly changed by the repeal of exclusionary immigration laws, Asian America was articulating its identity and proclaiming its membership as largely East Asian and Filipino/a.⁷ The boundaries of Asian America were being tightly delineated even as immigrants from other parts of Asia, such as South Asia (comprising Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) and refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos were arriving. The arrival of these groups would soon challenge the limits of Asian America.

In the discussion that follows, we take up a few works that are considered central to the understanding of Asian American literature. We engage them briefly so as to provide the framework for the literary assessment of these writings and to acquaint readers with their impact on the field. Our contributors examine these and other writings more fully in this volume. The literary history we wish to recount is one of creative invention. Literary works became fashioned through the fire of a specific political movement into a type of expressive articulation that would inform the shape of future work, even if writers in subsequent decades rejected some of the movement's core assumptions. It is helpful to consider these core assumptions as providing writers with the type of aesthetic scaffolding that literary scholar Alastair Fowler describes in a classic study of genre: "Far from inhibiting the author, genres are a positive support. They offer room, as one might say, for him to write in – a habitation of mediated definiteness, a proportioned mental space, a literary matrix by which to order his experience during composition."⁸ Many aspiring self-fashioned Asian American writers understood all too well during the movement days that they were both forging a new literary tradition and reshaping an existing American tradition. We are all heirs to their invention, whether we consider ourselves Asian Americans or not, and

we are beneficiaries of the range of creative expressions that this inventing has enabled. Helena Grice, in her monograph on Maxine Hong Kingston, explains that Kingston saw herself in *China Men* as continuing in the vein of William Carlos Williams, creating a mythic voice and reshaping American literary expression, experimenting “with a way to tell the story of a culture of story-tellers”⁹ and doing so in “an American language that has Chinese accents.”¹⁰

Asian American Literature and the Nation-State

The permanent physical presence of Asians in the Americas can be traced back to more than two hundred and fifty years ago, to at least as early as 1763. This is when Filipino sailors working on the Spanish galleons of the Manila trade arrived on the coast of Louisiana and, jumping ship, established the first continuous Asian settlement of St. Malo.¹¹ In the same century, Indians from India were manumitted from slavery in the British colonies of North America. Indians from India also marched in the Fourth of July parade of 1851 to celebrate the fact that these colonies no longer existed, having been replaced by an independent nation.¹² There are historical documents that show that these events occurred, although their particulars have not come to us from the individuals who participated in them. Certainly none of the historical records can serve as evidence of these individuals’ attempts to give aesthetic shape to their thoughts, longings, or disappointments. Asian bodies occupied the physical terrain of the New World and were present as the Americas were carved up into a series of nation-states, but Asians lacked the opportunity to contribute to the national literatures – and especially the most dominant of these, the U.S. national literature – that would eventually spring from this long history.

It is no wonder that when writers connected to the Asian American movement began to consider what it meant for them to write as Asian Americans, their conversations were most urgently directed to the nation-state to which they felt they belonged but by which they were not recognized as belonging. In 1972, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Hsu Wong published a literary manifesto in the guise of an introduction to their coedited collection *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers*. They declared that they were rejecting “[s]even generations of suppression under legislative racism and euphemized white racist love.”¹³ They were casting off the destructive effects of Asian Americans’ internalized racism. No more “self-contempt [and] self-rejection” (xii) for them. They were writers of a “whole voice” (xii) entirely their own, a new language forged from the

depths of their seven generations of experience on U.S. soil – the hardships, resistance, resilience, and triumphs. Asian Americans are, they said, “not one people but several – Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, and Filipino Americans” (xi).

This thematic proclamation, while troubling in several ways (and which future writers and critics would significantly revise), offers a productive starting place for a consideration of what makes Asian American writing unique. The coeditors in their introduction disdain the writing of those authors whose narratives and representations of the Chinese American experience – they are especially critical of Chinese American writers – pander to white readers’ expectations to create the formulaic “Chinatown book” whose “essence ... was, ‘I’m American because I eat spaghetti and Chinese because I eat chow mein’” (xvi–xvii). They conclude their introduction with the assertion:

The Asian American writers here are elegant or repulsive, angry and bitter, militantly anti-white or not, not out of any sense of perversity or revenge but of honesty. America’s dishonesty – its racist white supremacy passed off as love and acceptance – has kept seven generations of Asian American voices off the air, off the streets, and praised us for being Asiatically no-show. ... [I]t is clear that we have a lot of elegant, angry, and bitter life to show. We know how to show it. We are showing off. If the reader is shocked, it is due to his own ignorance of Asian America. We’re not new here. (xxii)

The Asian American creative voice that this document describes is one of anger and pride. This voice demands recognition of the Asian presence in the United States and acknowledgment of Asians’ contributions to the building of the country. It rejects the ways in which Asians in the United States are socialized into being passive and compliant, perceived as being effeminate, made to forget their own manly history in constructing the transcontinental railroads, and unappreciated for their endurance through challenges like lynching by nativist groups and laws that made it impossible for Asian women to join Asian men, resulting in the emergence of large bachelor societies.

The robust claiming of a “whole voice” found in *Aiiieeeee!* is also evident in Frank Chin’s plays *Chickencoop Chinaman* and *The Year of the Dragon*, which were staged in 1972 and 1974, respectively. Tam Lum, the Chinese American writer-filmmaker protagonist of *Chickencoop Chinaman*, declares, “[I]n the beginning there was the Word! Then there was me! And the Word was CHINAMAN. And there was me. I lipped the word as if it had little lips of its own. ‘Chinaman’ said on a little kiss. I lived the Word! The Word is my heritage.”¹⁴ The emphasis in this soliloquy is on how language has shaped,

and confined, what the speaker can imagine himself to be. He is reduced to a single word: CHINAMAN. The word becomes an agent capable of speech, made singular and formal through capitalization as if it were a surname of some sort. The “Word” enunciates into being Tam, who is thus reduced to what is spoken. Language speaks its racist meaning through Tam, and Tam is merely the effect of language. In response, the soliloquy in its verbal play and dazzling discombobulation seeks to undo the limited meaningfulness of such language, ripping a hole in ordinary speech in order to make it possible for a different meaning to be spoken.

Chin’s later novel *Donald Duk* (1991) continues and refines this assertion of a voice that has systematically been voided of possibility; it lambasts the U.S. public school system as the instrument of state socialization and compliance that keeps the country ignorant about the accomplishments of its racial and ethnic minorities. The Word’s power is maintained, then, by institutions like the school that determine what can and cannot be said. The protagonist is Donald Duk, a twelve-year-old boy who in his dreams resurrects the contributions of the Chinese American railroad workers. His father is impatient with Donald’s complaint that his teacher is ignorant about the Chinese contribution to the railroads and the history books’ silence about this valuable labor. His father exhorts Donald:

History is war, not sport! You think if you are a real good boy for them, do what they do, like what they like, get good grades in their schools, they will take care of you forever? . . . You believe in the goodness of others to cover your butt, you’re good for nothing. So, don’t expect me to get mad or be surprised the *bokgwai* never told our history in their books you happen to read in the library, looking for yourself. You gotta keep the history or lose it forever, boy. That’s the mandate of heaven.¹⁵

Notably, the emphasis in this passage is not on the power of the limiting dominant Word to define who the protagonist is. Rather, the protagonist is called upon to speak forcefully back, to found his own institutions for maintaining a history and a story that is precariously on the verge of being lost. The developmental trajectory of the novel consists of Donald’s being able to convert his dreamscapes into powerful daytime articulations, of his acquiring the confidence to assert his unrecognized and uncelebrated history into his own and his classmates’ waking life. If a strictly enforced “Word” defines, or even denies, the existence of a character like Donald as an Asian American person, this passage speaks to the need to insist on one’s own capacity to make meaning, shape stories, remember in a way unencumbered by what has been sanctioned by extant systems of authority.

The same idea occurred to other Asian American writers of this period, although they found themselves contending not only with racism but also sexism. When we consider the development of Frank Chin's, and his peers', critical and metafictional reflections on the need to develop a "whole voice," it is difficult not to notice the ways in which their articulations are informed by a masculinist strain of thought that is focused on the rejection of the stereotypical image of the effeminate Asian male. In contrast to such a preoccupation is Maxine Hong Kingston's memoir *The Woman Warrior* (1976). The publication of this book and its enthusiastic reception by all readers – Asian Americans and non-Asian Americans alike, but, most particularly, women of all race and ethnicities – was a powerful contribution to feminist writings. It brought mainstream feminism into dialogue with feminists of color. It also launched one of the most celebrated debates in Asian American literature, between Kingston and Chin. The details of this debate are discussed in Chapter 16, which is focused on Kingston. Chin's vituperative attacks on what he perceives to be Kingston's capitulation to white readers' expectations of Asian female oppression and exotic Asian cultural landscapes find a spirited rejoinder in Kingston's fiction and other creative nonfiction. She is resolutely confident in her position, making no apologies for her championing of female power in her own family and in Chinese mythology.

At the same time, Kingston does not shy away from the challenge of being Chinese in the United States or the vulnerabilities she has to overcome as a young girl to find her voice and assert herself. She was born in "the middle of World War II," she writes, and her childhood was marked by airplanes in the sky, machines she must learn to "fly between."¹⁶ In fact, she says,

America has been full of machines and ghosts – Taxi Ghosts, Bus Ghosts, Police Ghosts, Fire Ghosts, Meter Reader Ghosts, Tree Trimming Ghosts, Five-and-Dime Ghosts. Once upon a time the world was thick with ghosts, I could hardly breathe; I could hardly walk, limping my way around the White Ghosts and their cars. There were Black Ghosts too, but they were open eyed and full of laughter, more distinct than White Ghosts. (96–7)

As any reader of *Woman Warrior* will know, the idea of "Ghosts" comes from the narrator's mother, who uses the word consistently to demarcate the lines between the Chinese and everyone else. When the narrator uses the word, however, it becomes repurposed. It becomes a trope for imagined fears that nonetheless have a powerful hold on the author. Combining the physicality of machines and the corporeality of people with the insubstantiality of Ghosts, this passage demonstrates Kingston's skillful way of diminishing the control

of Ghosts by foregrounding the writer's imagination and expressive facility as having the power to make the Ghosts vanish. Kingston's expressive power comes from her drawing on family history, Chinese history and mythology, and her own inner resources.

Unlike Chin, Kingston offers her reader a less oppositional and more syncretic approach to addressing the problem of Asian American absence. Kingston's memoir closes with the story of Ts'ai Yen, a poetess of second-century China who is captured by one of the Southern "barbarian" tribes of the region, and who spends twelve years in captivity. During this time, Ts'ai Yen "sang about China and her family there. Her words seemed to be Chinese but the barbarians understood their sadness and anger" (209). When she returns to her homeland, "[s]he brought her songs back from the savage lands." One of these is "a song that Chinese sing to their own instruments," Kingston writes, because "[i]t translated well" (209). This story dramatizes how specific forms of creative expression can travel across different lands and, in the process, acquire new dimensions and textures. Individuals who endure physical hardships and transform these experiences into songs, stories, and poems speak in powerful emotional ways to one audience and, to other audiences in other places, offer innovations that alter the forms as they are practiced in their places of origin.

This culminating story in *Woman Warrior* clearly points to the more generalizable experience of migration and power asymmetry, and of the ways in which creative expression endures and flourishes as a result of movement between lands and interaction among diverse peoples. If there is a way to read this ending to *Woman Warrior* metafictionally, it is as a promise that Asian Americans do not have to invent a "whole voice" from scratch but can fashion what exists into something new and useful, creating a new literary form that is as complex and beautiful as what came before. The fact that Ts'ai Yen returns to China speaks, as well, to how Kingston's eclectic sensibility, her embrace of multiple influences, signals a desire for a voice that dissolves boundaries, and is not focused, as Frank Chin's is, on the United States exclusively. While obviously *Woman Warrior* is specifically focused on China and the United States, the closing story suggests that the relationship between, in this instance, China and other lands is a fluid one. Kingston reminds us that the conventional use of language like "barbarian" fails to capture diverse peoples and their rich modes of expression. In the phrase "translated well," we can perhaps glean an early idea of the diasporic and transnational turns that will come increasingly to define what we think of as Asian American literature's key attributes.

Together, the works of Chin and Kingston gesture toward at least two noteworthy strains of thought about what Asian American literature endeavors to become, aspirations that emerged out of the same historical period that gave birth to the Asian American movement. Whatever their disagreements about gender, myth, or culture, what we might notice in this all too brief discussion of Chin's and Kingston's contributions to the development of Asian American literature is how they find common ground in the need to write as Asian Americans who have unique stories of their own to tell. While neither might agree about what it means to write as an Asian American, for both that imperative means more than writing as a person who happens to live in the United States and have Asian ancestry. It is, rather, a specifically political act, one that calls attention to a history of oppression – whether just racial or combined with other kinds of inequalities of power – that informs the act of creating aesthetic objects. As Kingston writes in *Woman Warrior*, “I have so many words – ‘chink’ words and ‘gook’ words too – that they do not fit on my skin” (53). Everything, even the language of racism – “chink” and “gook” – becomes transmuted into creative expression.

Inventing a Tradition

Asian American literature refers to more than simply any aesthetically crafted text by American writers of Asian ancestry. It also refers to a tradition of resistance that writers can claim as their own. It makes sense, therefore, that some writers from the past – who wrote before the 1968 zenith of the Asian American movement – have been reclaimed and celebrated. These include Sui Sin Far, Carlos Bulosan, and John Okada. It also makes sense that other writers, such as Onoto Watanna, Jade Snow Wong, and later Amy Tan and Bharati Mukherjee, have had a more complex reception in critical evaluations of Asian American literature. The former set of writers was involved in acknowledging a racial difference, directly confronting injustices, and using the written word as tools for fairly explicit political ends. These writers thus seemed to construct a tradition to work with. Writers who came after could embrace this early political history, steer clear of its imperatives, or recast its particular details. Regardless of what the later writers do, they are aware of this tradition and recognize that they are not working in isolation.

Bulosan's part-fictional memoir *America Is in the Heart* (1946) traces a journey from the Philippines to the United States and is structured in four parts. The first is located in the Philippines when the author is a child, the second in the United States as a young man who endures great hardships because of his

race and class, the third as a slightly older man who learns to interpret what he has endured, and the fourth as an activist issuing a call to arms to turn learning into action. The catalyst for these transformations is the experience of having his initial idealistic anticipation of life in the United States shaken by the racism and class oppression he encounters, and the resulting deprivation of opportunity he suffers in depression-gripped America. He becomes involved in labor organizing work among migrant farmworkers and finds release from his frustration in this fashion. What marks Bulosan's narrative as quintessentially American, an attribute asserted prominently in the title, is that he discovers a new identity as a writer while undergoing treatment for tuberculosis. He devours works of white male writers like Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, and Hart Crane, nonwhite writers like Richard Wright and Youngblood King, and other esteemed male writers from beyond the United States' borders, including Maxim Gorky, Lu Xun, and Federico Lorca. He thus absorbs, and insists upon, a sense of literature and history that is simultaneously American and cosmopolitan, boundless, and, yet disappointingly, restricted in its gender dynamics.

Bulosan's narrator goes on to shape a voice for himself that buoys his hopes and helps him recover from the pain of his prior immigrant experiences. In hospital, a fellow patient asks the narrator to write a letter to his mother in Arkansas to tell her he's "okay." The young man has never learned to write, and so Bulosan writes for him:

I was writing to her what I had had in my mind and heart for years. The words came effortlessly, I was no longer writing about this lonely sick kid, but about myself and my friends in America. I told her about the lean, the lonely, and miserable years. I mentioned places and names. I was not writing to an unknown mother any more. I was writing to my own mother plowing in the muddy fields of Mangusmana: it was the one letter I should have written before. I was telling her about America. Actually, I was writing to all the unhappy mothers whose sons left and did not return.¹⁷

The invention, or reinvention, of self is a uniquely American literary tradition, and Bulosan's articulation of his own newfound self aligns easily with assertions of earlier Americans like Benjamin Franklin, William Apess, Frederick Douglass, and Whitman. But in this passage, Bulosan also seems to outdo all of these writers. His narrator claims an all-encompassing and ludic sense of self that can speak not only for his fellow illiterate patient but also as himself and, in the final lines, for all "sons" who "left and did not return." The audience of his letter likewise shifts between a specific mother, the patient's mother, his own mother, and "all the unhappy mothers." The kinds of slippages found

in this passage are indicative of the way the book as a whole effortlessly slips between Bulosan's individual experiences and the experiences of other Filipino immigrants. It is as if the narrator is seeking to contain in a single person's life story the story of an entire group and its encounter with the United States. This umbrella narrative, in turn, is meant to stand in for a much larger story about collective struggle and aspiration among all the working peoples of the world.

In John Okada's *No-No Boy* (1957), the yearnings of the native-born Japanese American son to be wholly and exclusively American is challenged by his immigrant mother's refusal to distance herself from Japan and terminate her allegiance to it. The shock of internment/incarceration, the sense of betrayal felt by those of Japanese descent that the United States had violated their constitutional rights and treated them as potential traitors, is in this novel intertwined with a deep, almost painful, yearning to belong and be marked unequivocally as American. The protagonist Ichiro expresses in long internal monologues his ambivalent feelings both for his mother and for the country. She forbids him from fraternizing with other Japanese American men who fought in the U.S. military during World War II, reminding him that to be Japanese is the ultimate gift. Okada writes,

Through his anger crept up a sudden feeling of remorse and pity. . . . Was it she who was wrong and crazy not to have found in herself the capacity to accept a country which repeatedly refused to accept her or her sons unquestioningly, or was it the others who were being deluded, the ones . . . who believed and fought and even gave their lives to protect this country where they could still not rate as first-class citizens because of unseen walls?¹⁸

What caught the attention of Chin and his cohort, and what has sustained the attention of many readers since, is the raw intensity of the emotions that are expressed in passages like this one. Okada has his character feel anger, rage, depression, self-pity, and loathing. These are powerful negative emotions that spill over the confines of good behavior, civility, and accommodation. These latter sentiments are those that Ichiro strives for as a safe haven, a refuge, from his troubles, but they are beyond his reach because of his conflicted feelings. The overt injustice of the internment is a topic that won't go away in this novel. It leads the narrator to question the values of a country that could have condoned such a policy and then just as quickly pretended that the deleterious consequences of such a policy did not exist.

We can compare this depiction of the postwar Japanese American community in Seattle with the portrait of Japanese American life found in Monica

Sone's *Nisei Daughter* (1953), a memoir about the author's growing up in pre-war Seattle and the life she leads after. The war years are sandwiched into two short chapters, each beginning with a sense of the tragedy of what is happening to her and her family and her community before veering sharply off into another direction, into happier memories that almost erase from view where the events the book recounts are taking place. It is surprisingly easy for readers to engage this book and not recall any mention of mass incarceration. We can also compare *No-No Boy* to Hisaye Yamamoto's "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara" (1950). This short story is set entirely in an internment camp during the war, but the characters never mention this fact as they focus instead on what seems like an idyllic small-town life. Miss Sasagawara, who had been a dancer before the war, has trouble with her mental health, and is eventually sent to a mental asylum. The characters look at her increasingly odd behavior with befuddlement, while the story subtly asks the reader to consider who is more insane: Miss Sasagawara, who explicitly acknowledges how out of place they are in the camp, or the others, who resolutely refuse to acknowledge that anything out of the ordinary is occurring to them. Both *Nisei Daughter* and "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara" speak powerfully to the unspoken, which remains unspoken because of a cheerful affect. *No-No Boy* is incapable of being cheery, and as a result can feel to readers despite its overwhelmingly heavy mood like a necessary corrective, the kind of hard-hitting "honesty" that the introduction to *Aiiieeeee!* championed.

Through these examples, we can begin to reconstruct the reasons why some texts were held up as part of a literary tradition that informed the development of an Asian American creative expression that would, in the early 1970s, become distinctly visible as a recognizable literature. Since then, readers and scholars alike have sought out similar kinds of works with the same kind of criteria in mind: an emphasis on resistance, the claim of belonging to America and in the process a desire to redefine what America means, an unflinching willingness to examine injustices, and a championing of social causes that leads one outward from the self to one's community and beyond.

Expansion in Historical Context

Profound national changes were beginning to take place in the 1970s, just as Asian American literature began to be established as a distinct tradition. A period of unprecedented economic growth in the United States that had started with the end of World War II ran into a period of stagflation, the

neologism conjuring a sense not only of industries and commerce failing to produce wealth but also of a society that was no longer certain about its path ahead. The old confidence began to feel misplaced. A once mighty and apparently impregnable fortress of industrial might crumbled rapidly and became a belt of rust. Cities faced budget crises, illicit drug use became pervasive, and violent crimes marred daily urban life. Immigrants from all around the world began to arrive in large numbers (and continue to do so right up to the present). Meanwhile, manufacturing jobs were being moved elsewhere, to countries whence the new arrivals were coming, as industry relentlessly pursued increased profits by reducing the cost of labor, finding ways around stringent environmental protections, and recruiting friendly despots and corrupt bureaucrats to look the other way at practices that would have been severely scorned in the United States. A renewed Asian immigration was thus an integral part of larger historical trends remaking the United States' economy, society, and culture.

Nonetheless, the number of Asians in the United States would remain for the rest of the century a small fraction of the overall population, but as the years between the start of the 1970s and middle of the 1990s unfolded they began to become potent symbols of both promise and threat. Asian Americans were first imagined as a model minority, one that major news publications would characterize as deserving racial Others whose self-sufficiency and up-by-the-bootstraps pragmatism was held up as a sharp contrast to African Americans, who were characterized as demanding government aid to sustain their communities. Several scholars have written about this economically conservative use by politicians and policy makers of the Asians' apparent ability to rise above misfortune without government assistance. The often-repeated pejorative comments about Asiatic character were, in the light of this emergent thesis, reinterpreted to provide a paradigm that was held up, especially to Latino/as and African Americans, as desirable and something to emulate. Asians were compliant; they didn't make a great deal of noise in the public sphere. They were secretive; they relied on their own and didn't expect the government or outsiders to solve their problems for them. They worked for too little, and undermined the wages of free white labor; they were industrious, and they could demonstrate to pampered union workers how to be more entrepreneurial. Asians in the United States were cast as the "model minority," a seemingly complimentary, but in reality a devastating and pernicious, label that once again grossly simplified the experience of vast numbers of Asian Americans and drove a wedge between Asian Americans and other groups of color.¹⁹

The late 1970s and 1980s saw the influx of refugees from Southeast Asia – Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The latter were countries devastated by U.S. military campaigns conducted there. These refugees were different from the immigrants who came as a result of the Hart-Celler or Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 that lifted restrictions on immigration from Asia and sought the entry of highly qualified individuals in order to provide the United States with necessary expertise for a competitive edge during the Cold War. By contrast, refugees from Southeast Asia as well as immigrants from South Asia who came through the Family Preference system were not as highly qualified as the earlier professionals, but they were frequently “lumped” into the model minority category, with no attempt made by government and social service agencies to understand their particular socioeconomic challenges.

In the 1980s, the children of recent Asian immigrants began to make headlines for excelling in schoolwork. Soon after, they began to change the racial composition of prominent colleges and universities, their enrollments quickly exceeding their share of the overall population. This was a noteworthy trend at a time when political reaction against affirmative action programs resulted in a shrinking of other racial minorities attending these same schools. It was also at this moment that many schools began to hire professors to teach Asian American studies, especially in places where students and faculty had a hard time making a distinction between Asians and Asian Americans. The study of literature in particular benefited from this situation, as many schools, especially east of California (as some academics called the huge swath of the U.S. mainland that has historically not seen as large an influx of Asian Americans as this one western state) seemed more willing to hire professors who specialized in Asian American literature than in sociology, history, or psychology. Perhaps we can attribute this willingness to literature’s perceived status as a largely academic and theoretical endeavor, disconnected from the on-the-ground realities of democratic politics and power. Literature was viewed as less threatening than the other disciplines, in large part because of the way it had been taught – as an aesthetic artifact. However, the gradual but steadily accumulating influence of multicultural and postcolonial approaches to the study of literature from the late 1970s onward (Edward Said’s *Orientalism* was first published in 1978) gave to literature and literary studies a social and political relevance. Literature could no longer be considered simply as an object of textual craft. Its value lay in its serving as a complex entryway into a landscape of multiple significances – aesthetic, political, economic, and social.

A complete history of the impact of Asian American literature on literary studies as a whole has yet to be written, in part because this history is still very

much ongoing. What we can say, though, is that as the ranks of those who taught Asian American literature grew, the figures that had once enlivened the Asian American movement came alive once again in classrooms. Sui Sin Far, Okada, Bulosan, Chin, and especially Kingston found their way onto college syllabi, as well as works by other writers whose names were uncovered through careful scholarly research. Debate began to flourish about authors not included on such lists. As many scholars have pointed out, a selective tradition-making had left out prominent Asian American writers who were judged not to be true to a narrowly defined political agenda. Hence, critics of the narrow political agenda have pointed out the imbalance in celebrating the work of Sui Sin Far, a self-described “Eurasian” woman named Edith Maude Eaton who foregrounded the racism against the Chinese in the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century United States, while rejecting the much better known work of Onoto Watanna, the pen name of Winnifred Eaton (who also happened to be Edith’s sister). As Emma Jinhua Teng explores in greater depth in her chapter, Onoto Watanna’s writings were not political, unlike those of her sister; her works offered mainstream readers an exotic and easy-to-consume Oriental landscape. Similarly, there has been a growing reevaluation of works by authors like Monica Sone, C. Y. Lee (author of *Flower Drum Song*, which went on to become a popular Rodgers and Hammerstein musical and Hollywood film), and Jade Snow Wong, authors who were considered to be pandering to mainstream audiences by giving them a taste of the exotic Asian that white readers craved. At the same time, Amy Tan and Bharati Mukherjee remain troubling figures for scholars, as they seem to embody, in different ways, the very kind of literary sensibilities that the field of Asian American literature was founded to resist. Sau-ling Wong has written powerfully and effectively about the reasons for Tan’s popularity among mainstream readers and critiqued the narrative strategies that Tan uses to render the unfamiliar alluring and intriguing.²⁰ Other literary scholars have been equally caustic in their assessment of Mukherjee and her Orientalist depictions of women’s experiences in Asia in contrast to their “liberated” selves in the United States. However, Mukherjee has also been acknowledged to be narratively bold, showing in her characters’ experiences how Asia and the United States are inextricably linked.²¹

A Complex Literary Terrain Elicits Questions

These debates have led to a sharp rethinking among scholars and writers alike about what counts as Asian American literature, and what it means, if

anything, to write as an Asian American. Long-standing questions have gained renewed urgency, such as: Who constitutes Asian America? What works fall under the category of Asian American literature? How far can this category be expanded before it loses its value? To these were added: What kind of autonomy should the literary maintain from the political? What kind of formal qualities have we failed to attend to? Have we defined the political too narrowly, to encapsulate only progressive ideals found in a fraction of literary works by Americans of Asian ancestry? Have we reached a historical point when we should give up on the term *Asian American* all together? In other words, should we be investigating, as Kenneth Warren has done with African American literature, what it *was*, rather than what it *is*?²²

It is noteworthy that such questions have gained prominence just as we are witnessing the emergence of writings by Asian Americans that command attention both from their Asian American peers and from the mostly white literary establishment. Perhaps Maxine Hong Kingston was one of the earliest such writers, but many soon followed. To name just a few: David Henry Hwang, whose play *M. Butterfly* (1988) was a Broadway success and would eventually be adapted to film by the director David Cronenberg; Jessica Hagedorn, whose *Dogeaters* (1991) became a symbol alongside *Woman Warrior* of a post-modern style in American fiction; Chang-rae Lee, whose *Native Son* (1995) was published to widespread acclaim and would lead to his being selected by the *New Yorker* as one of the most important young authors working in America; and Jhumpa Lahiri, who would be the first, and so far only, Asian American to win the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction for her collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999).

We briefly turn to two of the most recent of these landmark works to consider their relation to concerns that prior generations of Asian American writers had made legible. In *Native Speaker*, Lee features an ambitious Korean American politician who is an impressive speaker and confident in his negotiation of electoral politics. The title's highlighting of the ability to speak, foregrounding voice as a weapon of influence and a means of assertiveness, continues one of the most emphatic and persistent themes of Asian American literature. The claiming of voice, the means to speak, the content of expression, and the language in which one voices one's presence and one's contributions – these are pervasive concerns. The novel is also a cautionary tale about too zealously pursuing the allurements of success and too readily making compromises with one's better judgment as part of the quest for "belonging" within the United States as a fully recognized member of the social and political fabric, themes that allow this novel to sit comfortably alongside other earlier works of Asian American literature.

Still, there is also a great deal of ambivalence about being too closely connected to an ethnic or racial group in *Native Speaker* that militates against its easy inclusion in a narrowly defined Asian American literary tradition. While Kwang, the politician, builds his career by turning to Korean American communities in New York City, and especially in the borough of Queens, his shadow, the novel's narrator Henry Park, chooses to betray his ethnic community and minimize any connections to larger racial causes. Both ethnic community and racial causes seem to Henry intrinsically suspect, and in response he becomes increasingly private in his self-making and retreats from the public stage: working for a private-sector firm that is taking on jobs that were once done exclusively by the government, and eventually giving up this work so as to stay at home and to work only intermittently alongside his wife as a kind of independent consultant on educational matters. While the narrator of Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* moves outward in ever more public commitments to various political causes, the self literally expanding to encompass all, Henry in *Native Speaker* seems to shrink ever more decisively from the public, engaging in acts of privatization that eschew the political all together. If anything, Henry seems to embody an individualism that at its best is tolerant of differences of every kind, but always at the expense of any aspirations for togetherness and greater belonging and collective striving for a common good.

Jhumpa Lahiri, by contrast, is emblematic of a secure and confident subset of a post-1965 generation of Asian American creative writers. This generation is comfortable negotiating the cultural landscapes of the United States, ancestral homelands, and dispersed diasporic destinations. The narratives they weave almost effortlessly make no apologies for the multiple allegiances of their protagonists. These are writers who don't worry about having to prove their Americanness. They simply assume it is so, and in some cases seem interested in a cosmopolitanism that would exceed the restraints of belonging to any one nation-state. In "Third and Final Continent," the story that concludes *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri compares the many migrations of her protagonist (from India to England to the United States) to the courage and adventurous energy that propels the astronauts of Apollo 8 to the moon. The story is set in Massachusetts at the historic moment of the first moonwalk by Neil Armstrong. The protagonist is a tenant in the home of an imperious ninety-year-old woman. Her authoritative and directive attitude toward him does not trouble him in the least. He sees her as vulnerable and in need of gentle handling. She is enthralled by the accomplishment of the astronauts, and she

repeatedly impresses upon her Indian tenant the magnitude of what they have achieved, commanding him to say “Splendid!”

The protagonist, however, as he reflects on his life in the United States years later, likens his experiences to that of the astronauts:

While the astronauts, heroes forever, spend mere hours on the moon, I have remained in this new world for nearly thirty years. I know that my achievement is quite ordinary. I am not the only man to seek his fortune far from home, and certainly I am not the first. Still, there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have traveled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination.²³

He clearly considers his journey every bit as worthy of praise as that of the astronauts, even if the astronauts are “heroes forever” while his accomplishments are more “ordinary.” Nevertheless, in the word “mere” the passage seems to suggest that he does not value the moon landing as much as his old landlady demanded. The ordinary becomes extraordinary as he considers the many years he has been on his journey, and the great distance he has traveled from where he was born to fashion a life in the United States. Because his journey has been quiet and understated and therefore less filled with the triumphalism that marked the moon landing, he seems to intimate that it is also a much greater accomplishment, something that stretches the bounds of “imagination” because it is at once so easy to overlook and so difficult to appreciate. There is a sense of enchantment that infuses the ordinary in this passage, in which the Asian immigrant’s experience is transmuted into something heroic.

While a novel like *No-No Boy* looked upon the first generation of immigrants with pity and disgust, Lahiri’s story looks at the experiences of the first generation with wonder. These immigrants are intrepid adventurers, the courageous few who have left what was familiar and expected in favor of something unknown and self-expanding. In comparison, her second-generation characters are repeatedly depicted as lost, stuck in ruts of their own making, preoccupied by casual sexual encounters that leave them unsatisfied and even more disgruntled with their lives. They are often upper-middle class, highly successful, so competent that they rarely have any trouble getting into the schools of their choice and the jobs they apply for – but all of this leaves her second-generation characters incapable of the very kind of enchantment that allows the narrator of “Third and Final Continent” to look back on his life with such awe and appreciation. Lahiri’s U.S.-born South Asian American characters display all the angst of the so-called Generation X and Millennials as they

attempt to juggle professional ambition with emotional attachments to family and friends. It is important to note that the deep darkness of the narratives of her second collection, *Unaccustomed Earth*, do not stem from the characters' sense of exclusion from the fabric of the United States. They are comfortably of the United States, secure in its embrace, and, at the same time, restless with themselves and the expectations they are both called upon and desire actively to fulfill. Lahiri writes exclusively of the middle and upper-middle class, and this tight focus can be seen as her strength as well as her limitation.

What is striking is how these contemporary literary works both continue themes that have been constant for many Asian American writers and simultaneously depart from these themes in subtle and overt ways. This echo of early themes in the writings of recent authors should not be surprising because Asian Americans, regardless of their differences, continue to share a common predicament forged by history and maintained by deeply embedded forces in our society. At the same time, many differences persist, emerge, and alter in shape, so it is difficult to generalize over much about any individual work, which contains within it complex textures of meaning and self-awareness that make it singular and irreducible.

Into the Twenty-First Century

A history of Asian American literature provides a complicated surface upon which to view the United States' changing character and shifting preoccupations. In its development, this invented literary tradition offers insights about this country's past and present: from a fledgling republic to a nation increasingly assertive about territorial conquest both within North America and beyond; from a nation selectively welcoming some immigrants while cruelly excluding others to a nation growing in confidence on the global stage as the self-proclaimed arbiter of ideals of freedom and democracy; and from a nation concerned solely with its own destiny to a grudging acknowledgment of the need to imagine the realities of unfamiliar others. Even as Asian American writings have resisted the characterization of Asians in the United States as foreign and invasive, they have also just as significantly upended the pejorative meaning of the "foreigner" and "outsider." In doing so, such writings recast this position as one of strategic advantage and enriched vision.

There has been a growing sense among scholars and activists that to be perpetually foreign does not have to be simply an attribute of weakness. Rather, Asian Americans are uniquely positioned to mediate a conversation between the United States and the world beyond, as well as to mediate a conversation

about the way this country used to be and what it is quickly becoming. They enable the United States to break free from its insularity and engage the global community in meaningful and transformative ways. A focus on the transnational makes the study of Asian Americans a way to deepen understanding of the United States' changing social landscape, and simultaneously an invitation to understand what is beyond this landscape's boundary markers – that is, to acknowledge the nation's involvement in the world outside its borders. Rather than seeing the history of Asian Americans and their literary endeavors as comprising a constant struggle for recognition, a shift toward the transnational enables a way of reading this literature so as to turn an apparent liability into an asset.

At the risk of being prescriptive, we suggest that an ideal reading of Asian American literature recognizes how this literature has the ability to engage *both* the United States and the world beyond its borders. It does not uncritically embrace American exceptionalism. Even as it absorbs the seductions of exceptionalist thinking and seeks to recapitulate it, it is also alive to and profoundly aware of the limitations of a worldview that gives scant attention to the global community and all that sustains it. The multiply situated nature of this Asian American consciousness – anchored in the United States and elsewhere – serves as a necessary corrective to national insularity. It challenges the decision makers and power wielders in the country to recognize the diverse realities of peoples' lives in Asia (East, South, Southeast, and West Asia) principally, but also in Africa and Latin America. Such dispersals of peoples of Asian descent alter the usual geography we employ to navigate our sense of the world, and this altered understanding makes visible the potential to knit together the world we share with others. While the ideal we outline is obviously extraliterary, it is congruous with the propensity of Asian American literary scholars to think of the literary as politically significant. Asia is pluralized, as one of our contributors writes, and Asian America can no more ignore the imperatives and experiences of West Asian (Middle Eastern) Americans, particularly in the years since September 11, 2001, than it can the Japanese American mass incarceration.²⁴ The scope of this literature is, therefore, necessarily ambitious and the forms of its expression richly multifarious.

The Structure: Sections and Chapters

The thirty-three chapters in this book are organized into six sections; they show how Asian American literature engages crucial issues of voice, visibility, identity, resistance, representation, aspiration, longing, belonging, justice,

allegiance, cross-racial alliance, transnational citizenship, and solidarity; and they illuminate the complexity of American creative output and its array of literary strategies in the elucidation of motivation, action, and setting. The sections and the chapters within them follow a chronological trajectory, beginning with the earliest Asian American writings and moving systematically to the present.

Section 1 explores the ways in which nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century writers of Asian descent living in the United States sought to write about their experiences and to give aesthetic shape to their writings. Its chapters seek to illustrate some moments that scholars have identified as the earliest extant writings by Asian Americans. In Chapter 1, Floyd Cheung illuminates autobiographical writings by Chinese international students in the United States more than one hundred years ago. He also reflects on what it means to recover such early works, and the problematic ways in which we might weave them in to a story about origins. In Chapter 2, Josephine Lee examines the forces that brought actual Asian bodies onto the nineteenth-century stage and how they troubled “yellow face” representations of Asian bodies for popular audiences, who had long accepted these stereotypical markers as attributes that made bodies conventionally “Asian.” She reminds us of how abundant these presentations were, and of how phantasmagorical. Chapter 3 presents Sunn Shelley Wong’s discussion of poems written in Chinese by early-twentieth-century immigrants stalled on Angel Island, basically in prison awaiting verdict as to whether they would be allowed to enter the country or be deported back to their country of origin. She calls attention to how the poems gain richer meaning when considered *in situ*, as literary works specific to the surfaces upon which they were inscribed. In Chapter 4, Emma Jinhua Teng trains her attention onto the early twentieth century and to the Eurasian (English father and Chinese mother) sisters Edith Maude Eaton and Winnifred Eaton who wrote under the pen names Sui Sin Far and Onoto Watanna, respectively, as well as giving much needed attention to two other sisters (Sarah Bosse and Grace Harte) who also lived remarkable lives and left substantial records of their experiences. All four sisters were notably cosmopolitan. Edith, for instance, was born in England, moving with the family to upstate New York, growing up in Quebec, and working in Jamaica for a short time before settling in different parts of the United States for relatively longer periods of time. Sui Sin Far and Onoto Watanna in particular wrote substantially and interestingly about what it meant to be Asian in the United States in the early twentieth century, and their divergent ethnic claiming also marks an important early form of pan-ethnic tension resulting

from the policies of the state. The chapters in the first section all speak to an important tension that has gone into the organizing of this history, namely both attention to ethnic historical specificity (the ways in which each Asian ethnic group has very particular trajectories of migration and settlement and reception) and consciousness of the various genres in which Asian Americans have excelled, ranging in this section from autobiography and memoir to the stage, short stories, novels, journalism, and poetry.

Section 2 plays out this same tension. It looks at the crucial period that spans the early twentieth century to the 1950s. These years are often known by Asian American historians as the Exclusion Era, which can be said to be in full swing after 1924, when the major piece of immigration legislation of that year decisively halted most forms of immigration to the United States from Asia as well as many other parts of the world (including Ireland, Italy, and large parts of Eastern Europe). This era formally came to an end after the end of World War II, as racial criteria were lifted from laws that govern immigration and naturalization through a series of congressional acts. These legal reforms began with the McCarran-Walter Act or the 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act and culminated in the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act or the Hart-Celler Act. The years contained by this era were marked both by ethnic struggles against racism and accommodations that allowed one to exist in a nation openly hostile in law and custom to the presence of Asians on its soil.

The chapters in Section 2 examine a series of authors who stand out as memorably navigating the tension between struggle and accommodation, with each chapter emphasizing a particular ethnic group. The identification of the literary figures in this section by their ethnicity highlights the reality that writers in this era did not think of themselves as belonging to a larger Asian American category. There are thus chapters that examine the Indian, Korean, Filipino, Chinese, and Japanese literatures written in English in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century, roughly the years between 1924 and 1968. Chapter 5 presents Sandhya Shukla's discussion of the memoirs of Dhan Gopal Mukerji and Dalip Singh Saund, two writers from India who achieved recognition in very different spheres. Mukerji succeeded in winning a literary award for a children's book, and Saund became the first person of Asian origin to win election as a U.S. congressman. In Chapter 6, Joseph Jonghyun Jeon gives a historically rigorous discussion of two writers of Korean ancestry – Younghill Kang and Richard E. Kim – whose works present a simultaneous concern with the homeland from which one has departed even while one is learning to adjust to a new home in the United States. This

was a time of the Japanese colonization of Korea, and both writers found themselves looking back to their ancestral nation in their U.S.-based literary creations.

In Chapter 7, Denise Cruz examines Filipino and Filipina writers of the pre-Asian American movement years to understand their ambivalences about the United States as it culturally colonized the Philippines and treated Filipino/a in the United States as inferior brown brothers and sisters. These works were “transnational” in their concerns, before the term gained currency. Cruz offers us a rare analysis of the writings of Filipinas Felicidad Ocampo and Yay Palilo, while also providing us new ways of understanding well known Filipino writers Jose Garcia Villa, Carlos Bulosan, and Bienvenido Santos. In Chapter 8, Patricia P. Chu examines the work of H. T. Tsiang, Jade Snow Wong, and C. Y. Lee, who offer complex depictions of Chinatown life in the United States, as men and women employ strategies of survival, solidarity, and success under conditions of suspicion and racism by the mainstream community. Wong’s memoir *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and C. Y. Lee’s novel *Flower Drum Song* were very well received by mainstream readers, and *Flower Drum Song* went on to become a successful Broadway musical and Hollywood film. Chu helps us understand the context for this success as well as the importance, though lower visibility, of Tsiang’s novel. In Chapter 9, Traise Yamamoto provides us with a sweep of important writings on Japanese American mass incarceration by those who had undergone the concentration camp experience. We are introduced to the works of Miné Okubo, Monica Sone, Hisaye Yamamoto, John Okada, Mitsuye Yamada, Daniel Okimoto, and Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston. She discusses their literary strategies of coding, masking, and ellipsis against the backdrop of Okada’s bare display of his characters’ anguish and rage.

Chapter 10 provides us with an important meditation on genre, with Jinqi Ling examining the rise of short fiction within the Asian American literary landscape and discussing the reasons for its status as the genre of choice for many Asian American writers in the pre-1968 years. The writers he treats are Toshio Mori, Hisaye Yamamoto, Carlos Bulosan (whose short stories are seldom discussed), and Bienvenido Santos. Chapter 11 closes this section with Cynthia Tolentino’s examination of Robert E. Park and the Chicago School of Sociology. These scholars, through their study and analysis of immigration and generational change, affected the way Asian American writers of this period understood race, with long-reaching consequences for the present. This chapter is crucial for helping us to demarcate the tension between ethnicity and race, and how this tension will come into play as the term *Asian American* becomes employed to categorize a class of literature.

Section 3 explores the emergence and growing strength of the Asian American movement as a time of awakening and mounting political consciousness. This movement took inspiration from both domestic and international sources. Domestically, the movement was spurred on by the claim to political equality and social justice that formed the basis of the civil rights movement, and led to the rise of black power. Internationally, Asian Americans looked admiringly at the decolonization struggles of Asia and Africa. The anti-Vietnam War protests shaped the Asian American activists' understanding of themselves as Americans, and they demanded an end to an unjust war of intervention, while working through an analysis of how Asians in the United States were bound historically and racially to "the enemy."

In Chapter 12, Daryl Joji Maeda examines the manifestos and speeches of the pioneering activists of the movement – such as the student strikers of San Francisco State University (whose activism led to the formation of the first ethnic studies department in the United States), the literary records of antiwar protesting, and the rise of second-wave feminism and its articulations as it affected how Asian American writers understood themselves racially and ethnically. In Chapter 13, Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns turns a spotlight on Asian American music and theater, as these became significant avenues during the Asian American political empowerment movement for establishing presence and resisting injustice and imperialism. She discusses Chris Iijima and the musical group A Grain of Sand (also known as Yellow Pearl) and the theater performances of Sining Bayan, the cultural arm of the Filipino American political movement, to show how their "agitational" performances thrust the Asian American body onto the stage and into visibility, thereby asserting and claiming power.

Chapter 14 discusses the role of literary anthologies in shaping an Asian American identity and an Asian American literary tradition. Donald Goellnicht both analyzes the usefulness of such anthologies as articulations of what constitutes Asian American literature and cautions against relying too much on such prescriptions, particularly because Asian American literature was forged precisely to resist representational prescriptions. Chapter 15, the concluding chapter of this section, examines the work of Maxine Hong Kingston, who emerged out of this era as one of the most important and possibly the most well-known Asian American writer. Stella Bolaki examines the extraordinary influence of Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, which urban legend deems to have been the most widely taught work of literature in American universities and colleges in the 1980s. Bolaki treats other writings in Kingston's *oeuvre*, helping

us absorb the significance of this author and establishing her contribution to American, Asian American, and postmodern literature.

Section 4 takes up the question of an Asian American literary canon, a profoundly problematic attainment for a body of writing that drew its strength from being at the margins and challenging the complacency of the center. It is odd, in other words, to consider Asian America as referring to anything but a margin. This is because, as the previous section reveals, the term emerged in the midst of antiracist, anti-Vietnam War, anticapitalist populist movements of the 1960s. As a result, the literature that was organized around this term gave birth to a core of thematic concerns: resistance; solidarity with struggles against oppression; belonging, performing, or claiming “Americanness”; challenging dominant culture and critiquing U.S. imperialism; unraveling claims of simple and culturally / racially coded intergenerational division; and debating gendered norms. In time, as activism led to more (but still far from complete) institutional inclusion, especially in higher education, a canon of Asian American writing developed that spotlighted these themes. Several questions related to this development include: How did the canon come to be established? What is included in the canon? What does the canon leave out? What kind of resistances to the canon are there, and have they spawned alternative canons? As Section 4 examines, several key works that might be said to belong to this literary canon are: Sui Sin Far’s *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* (recovered and illuminated by Amy Ling, Annette White-Parks, and Elizabeth Ammons), Carlos Bulosan’s *America Is in the Heart*, John Okada’s *No-No Boy*, Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warrior*, and Frank Chin’s *Chickencoop Chinaman*. More recent works would include the plays *M. Butterfly* (by David Henry Hwang) and *The Sisters Matsumoto* (by Philip Gotanda) as well as Chang-rae Lee’s *Native Speaker* and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies*. We should also add here that the canon crosses genres – drama, poetry, and memoir are as dominant as fiction (with the canon encompassing writers such as Mitsuye Yamada, Garret Hongo, Lawson Inada, Miné Okubo, Velina Hasu Houston, and Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston). What is the significance of these works to the field?

The chapters in this section do not embrace the canon as an uninterrogated concept. In thinking about canon formation, it is important to consider as well how literary studies have driven these debates. There are some key figures who have influenced the emergence of a canon, and other key figures who have articulated the risks of pursuing canon formation and the untenable exclusions that follow as a consequence. In Chapter 16, Viet Thanh Nguyen provides an important narrative analysis of the emergence of Asian American literature as an academic field. He addresses the contributions of the early

literary critic Elaine Kim, particularly her role in establishing Asian American literature as a significant body of work worth studying. He illuminates the importance of Sau-ling Wong and her introduction of sophisticated literary critical analysis, as well as her caution against the allure of transnationalism as a literary theme. Nguyen takes up, as well, King-Kok Cheung and her widening of Asian American literature to include the terrain of Canada, and he situates Lisa Lowe and her transformative perspective of Asian American experiences as marked by heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity (Lowe's work is more fully examined in Chapter 18). Other Asian American literary critiques are also discussed in Nguyen's substantive discussion of the field's steady acquisition of solidity and prestige. Chapter 17 examines the impact of Theresa Hak-Kyung Cha's work *Dictee* and its contribution to the foregrounding of theory in the analysis of Asian American literature. Timothy Yu explains how *Dictee* seized the imagination of Asian American literary scholars and shifted the terms of analysis from cultural nationalism to postcolonialism and poststructuralism as well as to a transnational lens.

In Chapter 18, Anita Mannur and Allan Punzalan Isaac engage the multiple significances of literary and cultural critic Lisa Lowe's scholarship, particularly its transformative impact on the field of Asian American literary studies. Lowe's reinterpretation of Asian Americanness opened up the landscape to draw in the intersectional axes of gender, class, sexuality, and transnationalism and made it possible for the field to consider writers and works that had hitherto been deemed to be inadequately U.S.-focused or insufficiently "Asian American," as the term was narrowly defined. Chapter 19 poses the necessary challenging question: whose Asia are we talking about when we use the word *Asian* as an adjectival descriptor? Samir Dayal compares the Asias of the United States and Britain and reminds us that Asia must be complicated and pluralized so as not to reduce this immensely vast continent with its diverse populations and histories into a simplistic playing field for Western colonial and imperial powers. By discussing the writings of Salman Rushdie, Hari Kunzru, Mohsin Hamid, and Bharati Mukherjee, Dayal shows how risky it is to position Asian American literature too rigidly within the ambit of the United States, and what might be gained by enlarging our consciousness to take in the various global geographical locations that these writers feature in their novels.

Chapter 20 focuses on South Asian American writing. Asha Nadkarni discusses how the presence of South Asians and their claim to be Asian American drastically troubled the previous terrain of Asian America that had predominantly comprised Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Filipino/a Americans, with

Southeast Asian Americans (from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos) as newer additions. South Asians (individuals with ancestries from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) seemed not to belong within the United States' conception of "Asia." Her chapter shows how U.S. writers and literary critics with ties to South Asia rejected the narrow understanding of "Asia" as articulated by earlier Asian Americanists and thrust their work forward to be seriously considered as a challenge to how "Asian America" should be defined. The prominent writer she takes up is Jhumpa Lahiri. Chapter 21 ends this section with Eleanor Ty's discussion of contemporary Filipino/a American writers, including Cecilia Manguerra Brainard, Tess Uriza Holthe, Gina Apostol, Evelina Galang, R. Zamora Linmark, Bino Realuyo, Jessica Hagedorn, and Brian Ascalon Roley. She shows how these writers respond to the legacy of U.S. imperialism within the Philippines and in the Filipino/a American experience. South Asians and Filipinos, in particular, challenge the field to consider the role of global colonization and its impact on the development of literature written in resistance to this force. Their focus is never exclusively on claims of power within the United States, and their writings challenge the field to consider the intersections between ethnic and postcolonial writings. This section shows how Asian American literary artists looked both inward nationally and outward globally, and provided expansive geographical, cultural, and historical landscapes with protagonists whose sensibilities and attachments were multiply situated.

Section 5 provides compelling evidence of the full flowering of Asian American writing. There is remarkable output in the years since 1965, driven by a restless creative energy and the entry of growing numbers of immigrants from Asia after the lifting of immigration bans that were first put in place in the late nineteenth century. The United States' military involvement in Asia – in Korea, Vietnam, and Cambodia – also led to refugee influxes, transnational adoption, and racial intermixing, which in turn led to articulations of a relationship to the United States that is characterized by complicated ambivalences. These sentiments find expression in creative experimentation, which led in this emerging period to bold innovations. Chapters in this section both focus on aesthetic experiments and treat individually the complex array of subethnic particularities within Asian American literature.

In Chapter 22, Seri Luangphinit explains the complicated and unique ethnic dynamics of Hawai'i and the impact on the literary output of these relationships. She also helps us understand the conflict between the indigenous people of Hawai'i and the settlers, including Asian American settlers, as this tension is manifested in fiction and in the literary politics that accompany the

publication of writings. Her chapter illuminates the racial formations unique to the islands, and the creative ways in which writers seek to give expression to experiences that are largely invisible on the mainland. Chapter 23 presents the robust landscape of Asian American drama. Esther Kim Lee's analysis charts three waves of contemporary Asian American drama, beginning in 1973, with the founding of the Asian American Theatre Workshop. She spotlights the playwrights, dominant themes, and aesthetic strategies of each wave, as well as the types of audiences each wave of playwrights reaches, and enables us to see how certain trends might continue into the twenty-first century.

In Chapter 24, Tina Chen addresses the rising prestige of fiction within Asian American literature, and the significant accomplishments by certain Asian American writers who have won or were finalists for acclaimed literary prizes. She asks how writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Cynthia Kadohata, Julie Otsuka, Chang-rae Lee, and Karen Tei Yamashita change the framework of American literature, and how their work and writing differ from "yellow face" literary creations like those of Robert Olen Butler. In Chapter 25, Dorothy Wang offers a provocative analysis for the relative invisibility of Asian American poetry and the inability of mainstream critics and publishers to appreciate the aesthetic strategies of Asian American poetry. She provides extended considerations of the poetry of Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge and Prageeta Sharma to show how these poets challenge conventional expectations by the mainstream literary establishment.

Chapter 26 confronts us with the "forgotten war in Korea." Josephine Park engages the work of Richard Kim, Susan Choi, and Chang-rae Lee to show how these Korean American writers resurrect and incorporate the Korean War, a conflict that appears to have all but disappeared from public consciousness. She presents the literary strategies of these writers as they attempt to give form to the war in Korea, particularly as it affected the lives of Koreans and their descendants. Chapter 27 gives us an analysis of the literary productions resulting from the United States' involvement in Vietnam and its disastrous consequences for those Vietnamese people who lived through the war as well as the subsequent generations of their offspring. In this chapter, Anh Thang Dao-Shah and Isabelle Thuy Pelaud focus on diasporic Vietnamese writers of the 1.5 and second generation, who are located in the United States, Canada, France, and Australia. The 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans are those individuals who arrived in the United States as young children or adolescents. Dao-Shah and Pelaud's analysis treats "the work of a generation of writers whose works are influenced by the first generation's mourning of the past, while actively promoting alternative memories

that connect the experiences of Vietnamese refugees in the diaspora with those of immigrants and other people of color” in the receiving countries. The writers they engage include Monique Truong and Andrew Pham of the United States, Nam Le of Australia, Kim Thuy of Canada, and Linda Lê of France. Chapter 28 is devoted to the writing of Cambodian American, Laotian American, and Hmong American refugees who settled in the United States. Cathy J. Schlund-Vials discusses their works within the framework of refugee aesthetics, comparing the writings to renderings of other traumas such as holocaust narratives. The tribunals trying the Khmer Rouge leaders form the backdrop to her chapter, and the authors she engages include Vaddey Ratner, Loung Ung, Bryan Thao Worra, and Kao Kalia Yang. This section foregrounds a body of literature that has come into its own, whose practitioners are confident in their creative maneuvers. The full complexity of Asian American literature and its boundless ambition are evident here. And yet, as the very next section reveals, this is not a body of literature that can comfortably rest on its own accomplishments.

Section 6 returns us to the uncertainties and flux that have been at the core of Asian American literature throughout its development. September 11, 2001 unsettled Asian American writers – and forced them to examine boundaries yet again. Scholars like Moustafa Bayoumi, Sunaina Maira, and Magid Shihade have challenged the field of Asian American studies to consider its links with Arab America. Their provocative assertions remind us that Arab Americans and South Asian Americans are easy targets of the “global war on terror.”²⁵ In addition to their exhortations, Japanese Americans, with memories of the internment, are also charging Asian Americans to consider their responsibility to Arab America and Muslim Americans. Asian American studies has been self-interrogative – understanding its potential and limitations, seeing the value of its initial boundaries and expanding and disrupting these to account for ever-changing realities. It is a space that both coheres and threatens to fragment – an uneasy but sometimes profoundly powerful aggregation of multiple subethnicities and groups. It teaches us a great deal about strategic politicization at the same time that it reassesses the coalescing of its fragments.

The chapters in Section 6 disclose the conversations of activists, artists, and writers about this current historical moment of the twenty-first century and what it augurs for the future of Asian American literature. What do the literary productions after 9/11 say about the possibilities of Asian American “inclusion” of Arab Americans? Several texts – novels and plays – by Muslim Asian Americans have emerged to engage the relationship of the state to Muslim Americans. Can Asian America engage Islam in its national and

global contexts? Will Asian American literature return to its original political thrust and abandon explorations of identity? Will it once again proclaim solidarity with struggles for independence and liberation beyond the borders of the United States? Scholars like Richard Gray, Elizabeth Anker, and Rachel Greenwald Smith express their disappointment that mainstream writers such as John Updike, Don DeLillo, Lorrie Moore, Colum McCann, and Amy Waldman do not sufficiently use the traumatic moment to reimagine the United States' relationship with the rest of the world or even with its own diverse populations. By contrast, many Asian American writers have plunged into the rupture of that moment to fashion powerful alternative expressions of pain, hope, commonality, optimism, pessimism, and possible rebirth.

In Chapter 29, Junaid Rana considers the ways in which racism and religion are "intertwined," particularly with respect to the figure of the Muslim in the United States, and how the narrative of the Arab and Muslim who can be identified "phenotypically" and is also a member of a culture perceived to be problematic is overturned by writers like Mohja Kahf and Bushra Rehman, who provide "complex portrayals of Islam and Muslims." Rana also discusses Pakistani writer Mohsin Hamid and Pakistani American H. M. Naqvi. In Chapter 30, Samina Najmi provides a reading of the aesthetics of war as found in the literary strategies employed by Arab American poet Naomi Shihab Nye and poet and performer Suheir Hammad. In addition, she examines the challenge posed by artist Wafaa Bilal's memoir *Shoot an Iraqi: Art, Life, and Resistance under the Gun* and the electronic artistic installation that it draws on in which Bilal "confines himself within a gallery space the size of a prison cell trying to escape the paintball shots fired at him remotely by Internet users." Najmi is interested in how Arab American writers depict the aggressions Arabs, Arab Americans, and Muslims experience in a United States after September 11, 2001.

The boundaries of Asian America that a consideration of Arab American writings necessitates are expanded southward in Chapter 31, in which Kandice Chuh engages the writings of Karen Tei Yamashita. Through an aesthetics of "thick time and space," Chuh shows how Yamashita's vision encompasses Central and Latin America and demands readers to engage "the relationships between natural and human-made worlds, the distribution of resources and channeling of raw materials by both state and commercial forces." Yamashita forces us to see the interconnections within the wider global ecosystem and to appreciate the beauty in the "quotidian." In Chapter 32, Konrad Ng takes up Asian American creative expression on new online formats – Twitter, blogs, and curated wikispaces. He shows how Asian Americans who use these

formats refuse to accept mainstream representations of their experiences. In this defiant imperative, the newest Asian American online creative voices resurrect the bold assertions of the writers who emerged from the 1968 movement. They articulate with confidence and skill, insisting on the complexity of their humanity. These writers offer an alternative and expansive rethinking of the United States' connections to other nations and other peoples and look outward and forward for the generations to come. Ruth Maxey's chapter deepens the complications attending what is Asian American literature by taking up in the final chapter of the volume, Chapter 33, a writer like Amitav Ghosh, who refuses categorization along U.S. ethnic lines and identifies more readily with his Indian Bengali heritage, even as his work is global in scope and ambitious in its historical trajectory.

Closing Considerations

What are the future trajectories of Asian American literary productions likely to be? Significant moments of trauma stand as landmarks of the Asian American experience: these include the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Asiatic Barred Zone laws of the early twentieth century, the denial of citizenship in 1922 and 1923 to Takeo Ozawa and Bhagat Singh Thind, respectively, the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II, the Vincent Chin death by beating of 1982 and the travesty of justice that followed, the 1992 Los Angeles uprising following the first verdict of "not guilty" in the trial of the police officers who beat Rodney King, and the detentions and deportations of South Asian, Muslim, and Arab Americans following 9/11. Wars and imperial ventures of conquest beyond the borders of the United States demarcate other sites of traumatic memories for Asian Americans: the colonization of the Philippines and Hawai'i; the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the Korean War; the American War in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos; the first Gulf War of 1991; and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Any prognosis of the future directions of Asian American literature will have to consider the degree to which these traumas both inform and are absent from creative output.

The current generation of writers and those that come in future years will likely experience less of the existential tension of what it means to be Asian American than did their predecessors; these writers are comfortably bicultural and/or binational, and they have come of age at a time when the United States can no longer see itself as separate from the global community. Their creative efforts draw on Western and non-Western traditions, and they demand to be received as serious artists, not as informants of unfamiliar

social communities. They see themselves as more or less tied to their ancestral heritage, but they also see themselves as autonomous writers, beholden to no coercions – neither those of the mainstream audience and publishing industry nor of the Asian American political or ethnic communities. The deep and textured landscape of Asian American literature that the last one-hundred-plus years has established provides them the rich tradition to draw on, play with, and expand upon.

Contributors

In selecting the contributors to this volume we have been mindful of the heterogeneity of the field. The contributors span different ethnicities within Asian American studies; they are recognized and senior scholars, for the most part, with some rising voices who are fast becoming noted figures in the field. Almost all of our contributors are literary scholars, with one or two exceptions whom we approached for the significant impact of their work on the field of Asian American studies. Among the chapters' authors are those who embrace with fervor the category "Asian American" as politically and culturally valid, as well as those who question its value and challenge its boundaries. In making our choices, we were driven by the overriding objective of providing a comprehensive and complex history of Asian American literature. We approach writers whom we consider to be in conversation with one another, to show how the internal debates and contradictions within Asian American literary studies animate and profoundly enrich our understanding of American literature and of the United States as a geographical entity crisscrossed by the world of which it is an inextricable part. We wish to close this introduction by acknowledging the pioneering work of two university presses – the University of Washington Press and Temple University Press – for their early, and continued, recognition of the value of Asians within the United States and the necessity for studying their contributions to the nation.

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Notes

- 1 See Karen Cardoza and Banu Subramaniam, "Assembling Asian/American Naturecultures: Orientalism and Invited Invasions," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 16. 1 (February 2013): 1–23.

- 2 Roshni Rustomji-Kerns, Rajini Srikanth, and Leny Mendoza Strobel, eds., *Encounters: People of Asian Descent in the Americas* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999) features the experiences of Asians in all of the Americas.
- 3 Chris Iijima, "Pontifications on the Distinctions between Grains of Sand and Yellow Pearls," in *Asian Americans: The Movement and the Moment*, ed. Steve Louie and Glenn Omatsu (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press, 2006), 6.
- 4 Eileen Tabios, "Absorbing and Being Absorbed by Poetry," in *Bold Words: A Century of Asian American Writing*, ed. Rajini Srikanth and Esther Yae Iwanaga (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 73.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Tina Chen, "Towards an Ethic of Knowledge," *MELUS* 30.2 (Summer 2005): 168–9.
- 7 See Michael Omi, "Out of the Melting Pot and into the Fire," in *The State of Asian Pacific America: A Public Policy Report. Policy Issues to the Year 2020*, ed. Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics (Los Angeles: LEAP Asian Pacific American Public Policy Institute and UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1993), 205.
- 8 Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 31.
- 9 Maxine Hong Kingston, quoted in Helena Grice, *Maxine Hong Kingston* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2006), 44.
- 10 Ibid., 43.
- 11 See the film by Loni Ding, *Ancestors in the Americas* (1997–8).
- 12 S. Chandrasekhar, ed., *From India to America: A Brief History of Immigration; Problems of Discrimination; Admission and Assimilation* (La Jolla, CA: A Population Review Book, 1982), 12.
- 13 See the 1973 preface of Jeffrey Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong, eds., *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writing* (New York: Meridan, 1997), xii.
- 14 Frank Chin, *Chickencoop Chinaman and The Year of the Dragon* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981), 6.
- 15 Frank Chin, *Donald Duk* (Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press, 1991), 123.
- 16 Maxine Hong Kingston, *Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (New York: Vintage, 1976), 96.
- 17 Carlos Bulosan, *America Is in the Heart: A Personal History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973), 247.
- 18 John Okada, *No-No Boy* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1979), 104.
- 19 See esp. ch. 2 in Daryl Maeda, *Chains of Babylon: The Rise of Asian America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 40–73. See also Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
- 20 Sau-ling Wong is scathing in her critique of Tan in her essay "Sugar Sisterhood: Situating the Amy Tan Phenomenon," which appears in David Palumbo-Liu, ed., *The Ethnic Canon: Histories, Institutions, and Interventions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 174–210.
- 21 Criticisms of Mukherjee abound, even as she is also recognized for the boldness with which she conceives her characters. See especially the early collection by Emmanuel S. Nelson, *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives* (New York: Garland, 1993). See also Guiyou Huang, *Columbia Guide to Asian American Literature since 1945* (New York:

- Columbia University Press, 2006), 146–7, for an extensive listing of essays that treat Bharati Mukherjee’s writings.
- 22 Kenneth Warren, *What Was African American Literature?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).
 - 23 Jhumpa Lahiri, “The Third and Final Continent,” *Interpreter of Maladies* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 198.
 - 24 See esp. the challenge posed to Asian American studies by Moustafa Bayoumi, “Our Work Is of This World,” *Amerasia* 33.1 (Spring 2005): 6–9 and “Staying Put: Aboriginal Rights, the Question of Palestine, and Asian American Studies,” *Amerasia* 29.2 (2003): 221–8.
 - 25 See Sunaina Maira and Magid Shihade, “Meeting Asian/Arab American Studies: Thinking Race, Empire, and Zionism in the US,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 9.2 (2006): 117–40.

PART I



EARLY FORMS OF EXPRESSION
TO THE START OF THE
TWENTIETH CENTURY

The Origins of Chinese American Autobiography

FLOYD CHEUNG

The *Norton Book of American Autobiography* features only one work by a Chinese American: Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1976). What would it mean to trace the "origins" that led to this work? Kingston acknowledges Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1950),¹ but literary historians interested in recovering a longer tradition cite "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian" (1909) by Sui Sin Far née Edith Eaton. According to them, Sui Sin Far figures as the "foremother to the women writers of Chinese ancestry."² We could, of course, search for origins even further back in history, looking to the first book published by a Chinese American in English, *When I Was a Boy in China* (1887) by Yan Phou Lee, or even to what is "quite possibly the earliest book produced by a Chinese person in the United States," a friendship album compiled by Wu Lan in 1824.³ But to what avail? Certainly the mere identification of early precedents reinforces several important ideas – namely, that Chinese American literature did not suddenly burst onto the scene in the late twentieth century, that Chinese immigrants have been coming to the United States since at least the early nineteenth century, and that they and their descendants have been contributing to both its culture and society ever since. In addition, establishing a literary heritage can bolster the pride of a population that for a long time had been excluded as a Yellow Peril and only recently celebrated, albeit problematically, as a model minority.⁴ Yet might not any origin story tell us more about what we presently value and how we want to see the world than anything about the earlier works?

Without privileging one origin story over another, while also acknowledging that we can never entirely suspend the biases of our current moment, it can be instructive to consider the resonances between contemporary Chinese American autobiographical works and those written during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Besides relatively well-known early works by Yan Phou Lee, Yung Wing, and Sui Sin Far, we can identify the lesser known

“lifelet” of Lee Chew, the “reminiscences” of Huie Kin, and – if we expand our notions of what counts as “autobiography” – a number of ephemeral texts collected in *Chinese American Voices: From the Gold Rush to the Present* (2006), edited by Judy Yung, Gordon H. Chang, and Him Mark Lai. Taken together, these works are not origins in the sense that they provide models that directly influenced present-day writers. Rather, they are origins in the sense of being early writings whose purposes, desires, and difficulties anticipate those of later writers. Like many authors today, early writers often found that their only means of entry into mainstream discourse was through positioning themselves as cultural representatives, however ambivalently or wholeheartedly. From there, some take the opportunity to assert themselves as artists and political agents, while also negotiating new ways of understanding China as a nation or Chinese Americans as a group. Still others capitalize on the general receptivity toward autobiography to achieve different aesthetic and ideological goals. In most cases, they face a predicament in which the genre potentially serves both as a means of entry and as a prison house.

The Asian American Autobiographical Predicament

Although more than a hundred years have passed and much has changed, some conditions of literary production and reception for Chinese American writers remain stubbornly consistent, chief among them the tendency for the marketplace to interpret their work as autobiographical, whether it is intended to be so or not. While some writers certainly have succeeded in other genres, many are known primarily for writings perceived to be their most personal. The wide-ranging poet Marilyn Chin is most famous for “How I Got That Name” (1994), and Amy Tan still has to distinguish herself from the protagonist of her hit novel *The Joy Luck Club* (1989).⁵ Even Kingston, who went on to publish other novels and poetry, remains best known for *The Woman Warrior*, a genre-bending work that her publisher marketed as autobiography, which she considered “mildly deceptive.”⁶

Complications arise, of course, from the fact that autobiography is a slippery genre. While some subscribe to the conventional notion of autobiography as nonfiction, usually a “retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence,” others understand autobiography as a species of fiction, because the shaping of “memory” or “experience” into language necessarily introduces elements of selection and invention.⁷ Certainly, the category of Chinese American autobiography includes more and less conventional works. And it is partly the slipperiness

of the genre that can at once enable and trap writers as well as entice and frustrate their readers.

“Is it any surprise that autobiography was and still is the dominant discourse through which the Asian enters the national consciousness,” David Shih asks rhetorically.⁸ The reasons why it is not a surprise have to do with three kinds of desire: the desire of a broader public that seeks to know China through perceived native informants; the desire of a narrower – often academic – readership that seeks to recover what it has meant to be Chinese American through these seemingly authoritative sources; and the desire of writers to participate in cultural conversations about their own identities as well as wider-ranging topics. Because of the mainstream desire for “authentic” knowledge of ethnic others, individual narratives often come to be understood as culturally representative. Maxine Hong Kingston believes “that some day when a great body of Chinese American writing becomes published and known, . . . readers will no longer have to put such a burden on each book that comes out.”⁹ But for a long time now, this expectation that ethnic writers stand for their group has been both an honor and a burden. On the one hand, such an expectation gives an individual a potentially powerful opportunity to intervene on behalf of his or her culture or community. On the other hand, it can limit an individual writer’s freedom of expression.

This very nexus of expectations and desires creates a predicament for Chinese American autobiographers, as well as other ethnically identified authors. The following table outlines some of the tensions of this predicament:

Opportunity	Imperative
Honor of representation	Burden of representation
Healthy narcissism	Coercive mimeticism
Freedom	Constraint

At once, writers seem to be presented with the *opportunity* to intervene and yet are faced with the *imperative* to represent. For every Stuart Hall encouraging authors to “constitute . . . new kinds of subjects,” there is a Frank Chin waiting to judge their efforts as “real” or “fake.”¹⁰ Depending on a number of factors, this opportunity/imperative can be experienced as an *honor* and as a *burden*, often simultaneously. Rey Chow makes the intriguing case that Asian American writers, who do not see themselves reflected in dominant U.S. culture around them, ought to construct and gaze at images of themselves, hence participating in a *healthy narcissism*. In “The Secrets of Ethnic Abjection,”

Chow describes the problem as one of “lost or wounded narcissism.” Whereas individuals from the dominant group, according to her reading of Freud, go through a narcissistic stage and normally move beyond it, Asian Americans never experience narcissism in the first place, as a consequence of “the lack of proper societal representation, the absence of societal approval.” In light of this theory, Asian American “autobiographical writing is perhaps not simply a straightforward account about oneself but more a symptomatic attempt to (re)gain access to a transindividual narcissism – to grope for a ‘self-regard’ that has not yet existed.”¹¹ At the same time, however, the attempt to construct such images always gets caught in the trap of *coercive mimeticism*, another concept theorized by Rey Chow, which Paul Lai describes as “the incessant and necessary performing of an ethnic self for a mainstream audience as well as one’s ethnic group.”¹² Ultimately, writers find themselves simultaneously *free* to communicate with whatever languages, discourses, and genres they have at their disposal while they are also *constrained* both by the limits of those languages, discourses, and genres, as well as by the expectations that their audiences bring to bear upon them. Regardless, authors continue to write, knowing that silence, too, can be read and misread. Together these tensions determine the simultaneously empowering and vexing conditions faced by ethnic American authors.

This predicament affects practically all Chinese American writers who attempt to address a wide, English-literate audience, starting perhaps with Yan Phou Lee, the author of *When I Was a Boy in China*. Appearing as part of the “Children of Other Lands Series” published by D. Lothrop, this book appealed to turn-of-the-century readers’ faith in the authority of autoethnography or “self-culture-writing.”¹³ Accordingly, Lee takes up both the honor and the burden of representing his country of birth. Audience expectations of his day enable him to serve as a kind of “ambassador of goodwill,” as Elaine Kim puts it; but like any ambassador, he has to take care not to offend his audience.¹⁴ With this limitation in mind, Lee subtly exploits the genre of autoethnography to “intervene in metropolitan modes of understanding,” which was especially critical in the mid-1880s.¹⁵ The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which restricted the immigration of most Chinese and prohibited immigrants already in the United States from applying for naturalized citizenship, was passed initially with a ten-year expiration date. Hence, Congress was debating its renewal during the time when Lee’s work appeared. With little access to the courts and political avenues for redress, some Chinese Americans turned to print culture to make the case that “The Chinese Must Stay,” as Lee put it.¹⁶ To this end, Lee’s

autobiography attempts at once to satisfy readers' desire for the exotic and to explain that, in spite of cultural difference, Chinese are as worthy of naturalized citizenship as any other immigrants.

To appeal to his mainstream readers' expectations, Lee's work focuses on providing an account of Chinese customs and manners. For instance, Lee describes discipline in the Chinese household: "The family regulations in China are such that so soon as a child begins to understand, he is not only taught to obey, but also loses his freedom of action." This characterization may have reinforced the stereotype of Chinese docility, but Lee also takes the opportunity to demonstrate his command of Western culture with an allusion to a Greek parable: "I remember a constant sense of dread lest I should do something out of the way of a well-bred Chinese lad. The bamboo rod hung over my head like the sword of Damocles."¹⁷ His cross-cultural simile suggests that Eastern and Western cultures might have more in common than many Americans might have thought.

Like Lee, other Chinese American writers who meant to address an English-literate audience satisfied mainstream cravings for ethnographic knowledge in order to enter American public discourse, often with the aim to change dominant ideas about themselves and their country of birth. Clearly, this approach has its advantages and disadvantages. If personal narratives can be used effectively as "soft weapons," as Gillian Whitlock calls them, they can also be "easily co-opted" or minimized as innocuous "tourist guide" banter, as Amy Ling reminds us.¹⁸ In spite of these potential problems, K. Scott Wong and others argue, narratives like Yan Phou Lee's autobiography and his mentor Yung Wing's *My Life in China and America* (1909) have their value as attempts to "defend" China, on the one hand, and "broker" a new deal on behalf of Chinese and Chinese Americans, on the other.¹⁹

"As it is with the individual, so it is with the nation," Theodore Roosevelt declared at the turn of the twentieth century.²⁰ He meant this to inspire his fellow Euro-Americans to pursue a "strenuous life" worthy of a country rising in power. Yung Wing, however, heard this as a call to share his own life lived strenuously to prove that his nation of birth also could be worthy of respect. Writing at the age of eighty-one, a much older man than Lee was when he published *When I Was a Boy in China*, Yung accounts for his bicultural identity in *My Life in China and America*. His autobiography draws carefully and selectively from models of American manhood like Benjamin Franklin, Frederick Douglass, and Roosevelt to demonstrate that as it is with Yung Wing, a plucky boy who became a successful man, it could be with China, a nation with problems but also enormous potential.

At this time, many questioned Chinese manliness, so Yung attempts to prove his own, borrowing language from Franklin's model of self-construction, Douglass's model of self-control, and Roosevelt's model of self-defense. For instance, early in his autobiography, Yung describes an important encounter that contests Roosevelt's characterization of China as weak because it "does not possess the power to fight" and lacks "manly and adventurous qualities."²¹ During an event in Shanghai, Yung finds himself being teased by a "stalwart six-footer of a Scotchman," who ties cotton balls to his queue "for a lark." He asks the Scotchman to untie it, but the latter answers first with silence and then "[a]ll of a sudden, he thrust his fist against my mouth." Like Douglass, who in his famous fight with Covey demonstrates "how a slave was made a man" by defending himself first verbally and then physically – only in the case of failed negotiation, Yung initially uses words but then must resort to fisticuffs: "I struck him back in the identical place where he punched me, but my blow was a stinger." This show may or may not have impressed Roosevelt, but it certainly made an impression in Shanghai. According to Yung, "It was the chief topic of conversation for a short time," for no Chinese in that treaty port "had ever been known to have the courage and pluck to defend his rights, point blank, when they had been violated or trampled upon by a foreigner." Yung next generalizes from his personal success to anticipate his country's rise from degradation by imperial forces in the nineteenth century to increasing power in the twentieth. "The time will soon come," he claims, "when the people of China will be so educated and enlightened as to know what their rights are, public and private, and to have the moral courage to assert and defend them whenever they are invaded."²²

Appropriating what he believed to be an effective "soft weapon" of his time, the success-story subgenre of American autobiography, Yung thus attempted to intervene on behalf of his country of birth during a time when it commanded little respect. Not only did Yung win his fight against the Scotchman, but he also went on to become a businessman, a leader in education, and a diplomat. Frank Chin, however, judges this very success as a sign of his failure. He calls Yung a "mission-schoolboy-makes-good Gunga Din licking up white fantasy," arguing that success from the perspective of the dominant marketplace must always be won at the cost of meeting its stereotypical expectations.²³ Hence Yung's predicament. He has the honor of standing up as an individual on behalf of his group, but he bears the burden of representing not only the political interests of his own time but also Chin's.

Published the same year as Yung's work, Sui Sin Far's "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian" offers insights regarding the nature of a

multiracial author's autobiographical predicament. It is already difficult, if not impossible, for Chinese Americans to find "proper" reflections of themselves in dominant American culture, as Rey Chow puts it. How much more difficult it must have been for Sui Sin Far, the daughter of a Chinese mother and an English father? Sui Sin Far's autobiographical essay brilliantly and poignantly "gropes for a self-regard" that did not exist for her in the late nineteenth century.²⁴ For example, while passing as Euro-American in a midwestern town, Sui Sin Far reveals herself in the following way during a racially charged conversation: "the Chinese people may have no souls, no expression on their faces, be altogether beyond the pale of civilization, but whatever they are, I want you to understand that I am – I am a Chinese."²⁵ Hence, she vindicates a group's identity, specifically that of Chinese and by extension Chinese Americans. Yet while Sui Sin Far sometimes identifies as "Chinese" in order to counter racism, her autobiographical work situates these performances as necessary only in the context of reductive and binary thinkers that have trouble perceiving her complex identity. Part of the work's brilliance, then, derives from its efforts to expand readers' limited mind-sets, specifically by generating epistemological dissonances that challenge her readers' ideas about race. David Shih calls our attention to her portrait photograph that accompanies the original 1909 printing of the essay, saying that "[a]lthough the name that ostensibly refers to this woman is recognizably Chinese, the woman is not."²⁶ In addition, moments in the text disrupt readers' expectations that names ought to match identities. For instance, at that midwestern dinner party, one of the interlocutors calls the author "Miss Far" instead of "Miss Eaton," which makes no sense, because she was passing as white at the time. Hence, in this personal narrative, Sui Sin Far negotiates her autobiographical predicament in a sophisticated way. She composes self-regard for Chinese or Chinese Americans when a setting or situation calls for it. She also questions the status of what is being regarded in the first place.

Not all writers write for the same reasons, but especially during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries readers expected ethnically identified authors to represent not only themselves but also their perceived countries of origin. This expectation produces both opportunities and imperatives, positive and negative effects. As Sau-ling Cynthia Wong observes, borrowing "a phrase applied to early African-American writers, Chinese-American writers 'entered into the house of literature through the door of autobiography,'" and even today, "autobiographies predominate Chinese-American writing in English."²⁷ Indeed, many Chinese American writers did enter the house of literature through the doorway of autobiography, but only because it was one

of the few passageways open to them. Then, after entering, many found not only their foot stuck in the door but their work having to meet impossible and contradictory sets of standards.

Autobiographical Writings as Social Documentation

While early Chinese American writers desired access to mainstream print culture for various reasons, and while many mainstream readers desired knowledge of China and Chinese culture through their autoethnographic works, present-day scholars in Asian American studies sometimes turn to their life writings for documentary reasons. Even literary scholars trained to analyze aesthetics sometimes “read the writing of diasporic authors as a reflection of their communities’ social realities and histories.”²⁸ While this approach may downplay the status of Chinese American literature as art, it certainly has yielded many important insights regarding Chinese American experiences and motivated the recovery of many works that otherwise may have been lost.

Chinese American Voices: From the Gold Rush to the Present contributes a great deal to the archive. Like any act of recovery, this anthology has particular biases, which the editors clearly identify. They choose to feature works that focus on “certain important moments or turning points in Chinese American history” and those that “challenge the stereotypes of Chinese Americans as silent sojourners, passive victims, and the model minority.”²⁹ As we know, book-length autobiographies by Chinese Americans published in the United States before 1943 are few. This volume therefore gathers shorter works printed in periodicals and books published abroad, as well as unpublished materials like letters and speeches.

Among these rarely before seen works is a selection from the autobiography of Huie Kin, the first Chinese American minister in New York, who published his book *Reminiscences* in Beijing.³⁰ Huie Kin is the classic immigrant to America who makes good. He writes, “Sixty years ago, in 1868, I left my native village . . . to make my fortune in the new land.” The twist comes from his religious epiphany: “I came to America for gold, . . . but have found riches that never rust and a fortune that cannot be stolen.”³¹ Echoing the Book of Matthew’s advice to store up one’s treasures in heaven, which cannot be stolen, Huie also turns a Christian cheek toward discrimination against Chinese Americans. He recounts being “spit upon,” but he ultimately performs the role of the model minority: “we went on quietly with our work.”³² With rhetorical cleverness, he quotes and paraphrases from others to make the case for interracial marriage rather than strenuously making it himself. And rather

than describe his own nine children, he quotes from a 1907 *Literary Digest* article: "Olive-skinned youngsters with American expressions of alertness run up and down the stairs." Overall, Huie's autobiography performs a version of Chinese American identity that attempts to balance assimilation with service to his community.

Other works appearing in the anthology give us additional insights into what it meant to negotiate a Chinese American identity during the Exclusion Era, as well as modes of expression aside from conventional autobiography. "Sing Kum, Letter by a Chinese Girl" (1876) is a short letter recounting how the writer was sold into slavery by her father, escaped to the Methodist Mission Home in San Francisco, and ultimately converted to Christianity. In the end, Sing Kum's letter feels like a hastily written conversion narrative, designed to confess her sins and reassure her saviors of her current spiritual state. While we do not know whether Sing Kum was writing honestly or strategically, Frank Chin would have observed her work as fitting in his definition of "fake" Chinese American literature, because it appears to "write to the specifications of the Christian stereotype of Asia being as opposite morally from the West as it is geographically."³³

Other Chinese American writers exploited this idea of America as supposedly Christian and moral in order to critique the country that would exclude them. "Saum Song Bo, A Chinese View of the Statue of Liberty" (1885) is a letter to the editor of the *New York Sun* complaining of being asked to help fund a statue dedicated to a liberty that he perceived as denied to Chinese Americans. With passion and directness, Saum Song Bo attests, "this country is the land of liberty for men of all nations except the Chinese," and asks rhetorically whether Chinese Americans are "allowed to go about everywhere free from the insults, abuse, assaults, wrongs and injuries from which men of other nationalities are free?" Saum Song Bo concludes by sardonically implying that his persecutors are idol-worshipping, unfaithful Christians: "Liberty, we Chinese do love and adore thee; but let not those who deny thee to us, make of thee a graven image and invite us to bow down to it."³⁴

Wong Chin Foo, the first person to self-identify as "Chinese American," employs a similar strategy in "Why Am I a Heathen?" (1887), which appeared in the *North American Review*.³⁵ In 1868, Wong immigrated to the United States at the age of seventeen under the sponsorship of Christian missionaries, but after witnessing socially sanctioned, legislatively approved, and violently enforced racism, he decided that being a moral heathen was better than being an immoral Christian. Problematically conflating Chinese Americans with heathens and Euro-Americans with Christians, Wong observes, "Though we

may differ from the Christian in appearance, manners, and general ideas of civilization, we do not organize into cowardly mobs under the guise of social or political reform, to plunder and murder with impunity.”³⁶ Baffled furthermore by the Christian idea that anyone can be saved no matter what they had done during their lives, Wong cannot imagine sharing a heaven that would admit anti-Chinese activists. With characteristic sarcasm, Wong asks rhetorically, “Suppose Dennis [Denis] Kearney, the California sand-lotter, should slip in and meet me there, would he not be likely to forget his heavenly songs, and howl once more: ‘The Chinese must go!’ and organize a heavenly crusade to have me and others immediately cast out into the other place?”³⁷

One month afterward, Yan Phou Lee, the author of *When I Was a Boy in China*, published “Why I Am Not a Heathen: A Rejoinder to Wong Chin Foo” in the same journal. Lee’s essay refutes Wong’s logic, recounts his own path from Confucianism to Christianity, but does admit that some people could be better Christians in terms of their treatment of Chinese. With characteristic balance in his reasoning and expression, Lee explains, “I not only discriminate between Christianity in the abstract and Christianity in the concrete, but also between its correct application and its perversion.” Lee draws from his own life to provide examples of “correct application”: “When I stood on the commencement platform to denounce the anti-Chinese policy of this government, it was the Christians who strengthened me with their enthusiasm and their applause.”³⁸ Perhaps Lee is overly optimistic when he imagines Denis Kearney “repenting at the eleventh hour”; but in 1887, such a reversal would have been necessary to avoid the potential renewal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1892.³⁹ While Lee may not have been able to persuade men like Kearney, he hoped that he could persuade a larger audience of Christians reading the *North American Review*, Alas, Congress did not agree with Lee in the end.⁴⁰

In “The Geary Act: From the Standpoint of a Christian Chinese” (1892), Jee Gam critiques this congressional decision and calls for the repeal of Chinese Exclusion in the pages of *Our Bethany*, the San Francisco organ of the Young People’s Society of Christian Endeavor. Besides arguing against the logistics of the law and admonishing the U.S. government for not adhering to the Burlingame Treaty of 1868, which assured the free movement of Chinese and Americans across their countries’ national borders, Jee Gam draws heavily on his autobiography to make a personal appeal. He identifies himself as “not any less Chinese for being a follower of Christ.” Both a Chinese immigrant and “in some sense also an American,” Jee Gam expresses both pride in his heritage and love for his adopted country. The complexity of his emotional relationship to America comes across clearly: “I have lived in America almost twice as

long as in China. I love this country. I teach my children who are native-born Americans to sing the National hymns. And just as I rejoice in whatever is honorable to America, and commend her example to my countrymen, I am pained when unjust and oppressive laws are permitted to be placed upon her statute books.”⁴¹ He is only “in some sense” an American not primarily because he is an immigrant but more importantly because Chinese Exclusion laws prevent him from becoming a naturalized citizen. Jee Gam does not relinquish hope, however, as he prays, “may God overrule all injustice!”⁴²

Appearing as the only Chinese American piece in *The Life Stories of Undistinguished Americans as Told by Themselves*, published in 1906, Lee Chew’s “Life Story of a Chinaman” makes a similar case, though without the religious rhetoric. Instead Chew draws upon his life story to claim that his upbringing and aspirations are not unlike those of most Americans, even though he spent his early years in China. With a touch of humor, he explains, “We had dogs to play with – plenty of dogs and good dogs – that understand Chinese as well as American dogs understand American language.” And Chew goes on to tell his immigrant story: his desire to rise from rags to riches in America, his time as a domestic worker, and his attempts at running small businesses. What makes his story different, of course, is that his aspirations to live the American Dream were hindered by racial discrimination. He reports that even in New York “at the present time the street boys are still breaking the windows of Chinese laundries all over the city, while the police seem to think it a joke.”⁴³ Near the end of his “lifelet,” Chew problematically reinforces an early version of the model minority myth as a way to advocate on behalf Chinese Americans: “Irish fill the almshouses and prisons and orphan asylums, Italians are among the most dangerous of men, Jews are unclean and ignorant. Yet they are all let in, while Chinese, who are sober, or duly law abiding, clean, educated and industrious, are shut out.” Chew then concludes by explaining that as much as he wants to consider America his home, its laws and racism prevent him from doing so. In saying this, according to the editor of *Undistinguished Americans*, Lee Chew expresses “opinions that are generally held by his countrymen throughout America,” for he is “a representative Chinese business man,” recalling for us clearly the burden and honor of representation that Chinese American autobiographical writings bear.

While *Chinese American Voices* does not include Lee Chew’s “lifelet,” it does include several other short autobiographical pieces. “Wen Bing Chung, Reminiscences of a Pioneer Student” (1923) is a speech delivered by the author at the Customs College in Beijing recalling his experiences as one of the students who studied in America in the 1870s under the auspices of the Chinese

Educational Mission. Chung tells his audience that they “were quick ... to assimilate American ideas and ideals, ... played baseball and football, and fought their way with the fists in true American style.”⁴⁴ And “Wong Hau-hon, Reminiscences of an Old Chinese Railroad Worker” (1926) may be one of the only surviving accounts by a Chinese worker who helped to build the western railway system. Fulfilling the desires of scholars who would one day look back on such early texts for details of Chinese American experience, Wong records, “I was one of the workers who were assigned the task of drilling. Each morning I climbed the rock, and after I had finished the day’s work I was lowered again by rope.”⁴⁵

Chinese American Voices is notable, too, for including autobiographical works not in English. For instance, “Leaves from the Life History of a Chinese Immigrant” (1936) is the story of a woman who came to Hawai‘i in 1891 as a contract laborer, as told to translator Elizabeth Wong in “broken English and Chinese.”⁴⁶ Despite early hardships, she concludes, “I lucky come Hawaii.” Other translated works in the volume include “Songs of Gold Mountain Wives,” poems written by Chinese women whose husbands traveled to America. While one might argue that these do not count as *Asian American* texts, the case can be made that many of these women could not be with their husbands as the result of the Page Act of 1875; that is, an American law deeply impinging upon these Asian women’s experience, hence making their lives “Asian/American,” as David Palumbo-Liu might punctuate it.⁴⁷ The “Kam Wah Chung Letters” (1898–1903) feature undelivered correspondence between Chinese American men living in Oregon, and their relatives and friends in China. The letters largely contain entreaties for men to return, appeals for money, and accounts of distress. “Detention in the Wooden Building” (1910) is a translation of a poem written by a Chinese detainee at the immigration station on Angel Island in San Francisco Bay. Rather than make allusions to a Greek parable for a Western audience, as Yan Phou Lee does, this poem makes references familiar to its Chinese-literate audience. For instance, the poet describes the insufficient bedclothes at Angel Island with the following allusion: “At night, we wrap ourselves in a single blanket, / Just like Min Qian wearing clothes made of rush.”⁴⁸

Unlike “Detention in the Wooden Building,” most poems written by Chinese detainees at Angel Island were not published in periodicals but carved into the walls of wooden cells. Are these anonymous poems autobiographical? Are they literature? Or are they merely the etchings of frustrated detainees who attempted to imitate classical Chinese forms – unsuccessfully, in most cases?⁴⁹ Stephen Yao argues that these poems were designed not only to capture

individual experience but also to participate in a communal project that transcended personal and temporal bounds. The example of the Angel Island poems, then, further expands our notions of Chinese American autobiography. While some early writers chose a more obviously Euro-American form and English language to “intervene in [U.S.] metropolitan modes of understanding,” the Angel Island poets chose a classical Chinese form and language to participate in a communal expression aimed at a different metropole.⁵⁰

Even in relatively early examples of Chinese American autobiographical writing, authors appropriated the forms of life writing they had at hand that best suited their particular goals, be they political, affective, aesthetic, or all of the above. Of course, writers write for many reasons, some of which have nothing to do ostensibly with self-presentation. Yet autobiography remains the “preeminent” American genre.⁵¹ Generations of Americans from Benjamin Franklin to Gertrude Stein to Barak Obama have drawn upon the potential of autobiography to define their membership in this polycultural nation. As Maxine Hong Kingston once said, “to be Chinese American is not the same as to be Chinese in America”; commenting on this quotation, Michael M. J. Fischer adds, “and to be Chinese American has no role model. It is a new construction.”⁵² The origins of Chinese American autobiography reside in this idea that a new kind of self, a Chinese American self, must be constructed and new models can be forged, no matter the social and literary constraints.

Notes

- 1 Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “The Tradition of Chinese American Women’s Life Stories: Thematics of Race and Gender in Jade Snow Wong’s *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*,” in *American Women’s Autobiography: Fea(s)ts of Memory*, ed. Margo Culley (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 256.
- 2 Annette White-Parks, *Sui Sin Far/Edith Maude Eaton: A Literary Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 6.
- 3 Karen Sanchez-Eppler, “Copying and Conversion: An 1824 Friendship Album from ‘a Chinese Youth,’” *American Quarterly* 15.4 (2007): 301–39.
- 4 On the history of Chinese Americans during this period, see K. Scott Wong and Sucheng Chan, eds., *Claiming America: Constructing Chinese American Identities during the Exclusion Era* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998). For an analysis of the relationship between model minority and Yellow Peril discourses, see Yuko Kawai, “Stereotyping Asian Americans: The Dialectic of the Model Minority and the Yellow Peril,” *Howard Journal of Communications* 16.2 (2005): 109–30.
- 5 Amy Tan, “Required Reading and Other Dangerous Subjects,” *Threepenny Review* 67 (1996): 5–9.
- 6 Kingston quoted in Youngsuk Chae, *Politicizing Asian American Literature: Towards a Critical Multiculturalism* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 46.

- 7 Phillippe Lejeune, "The Autobiographical Pact," in *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin and trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 4.
- 8 Frank Kermode, "Memory and Autobiography" *Raritan* 15.1 (1995): 36.
- 9 David Shih, "The Seduction of Origins: Sui Sin Far and the Race for Tradition," in *Form and Transformation in Asian American Literature*, ed. Zhou Xiaojing and Samina Najmi (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), 68.
- 10 Maxine Hong Kingston, "Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers," in *Asian and American Writers in Dialogue: New Cultural Identities*, ed. Guy Amirthanayagam (London: Macmillan, 1982), 63. For an excellent discussion of this dilemma, see Deborah Woo, "Maxine Hong Kingston: The Ethnic Writer and the Burden of Authenticity," *Amerasia* 16.1 (1990): 173–200.
- 11 Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence, 1990), 236–7; Frank Chin, "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake," in *The Big Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature*, ed. Jeffrey Paul Chan et al. (New York: Meridian, 1991), 1–92.
- 12 Rey Chow, "The Secrets of Ethnic Abjection," in *Traces 2: Race, Panic, and Memory of Migration*, ed. Meaghan Morris and Brett de Bary (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 64–6.
- 13 Paul Lai, "Autoethnography Otherwise," in *Asian Canadian Writing beyond Autoethnography*, ed. Eleanor Ty and Christi Verduy (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008), 60.
- 14 Hertha Wong, *Sending My Heart Back across the Years: Tradition and Innovation in Native American Autobiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 6. On turn-of-the-century regard for autoethnography, see Dominika Ferens, "Winnifred Eaton/Onoto Watanna: Establishing Ethnographic Authority," in Zhou and Najmi, *Form and Transformation*, 43.
- 15 Elaine Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 24.
- 16 Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession* 91 (1991): 35.
- 17 Yan Phou Lee, "The Chinese Must Stay," *North American Review* (April 1889): 476–83.
- 18 Yan Phou Lee, *When I Was a Boy in China* (Boston: D. Lothrop Company, 1887), 18, 21.
- 19 Gillian Whitlock, *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007), 3, 105.
- 20 Amy Ling, *Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry* (New York: Pergamon, 1990), 16.
- 21 K. Scott Wong, "Cultural Defenders and Brokers: Chinese Responses to the Anti-Chinese Movement," in Wong and Chan, *Claiming America*, 3–40.
- 22 Theodore Roosevelt, "The Strenuous Life," in Theodore Roosevelt, *The Strenuous Life: Essays and Addresses* (New York: Century, 1905), 4. The speech was originally delivered before the Hamilton Club in Chicago in 1899.
- 23 Theodore Roosevelt, *The Works of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: Scribner, 1926), 20, 522, 13, 322.
- 24 Yung Wing, *My Life in China and America* (New York: Holt, 1909), 70–3.
- 25 Chin, "Come All Ye," 11.
- 26 Chow, "The Secrets of Ethnic Abjection," 64, 66.

- 25 Edith Eaton (Sui Sin Far), "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian," in Edith Eaton (Sui Sin Far), *Mrs. Spring Fragrance and Other Writings*, ed. Amy Ling and Annette White-Parks (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 225.
- 26 Shih, "The Seduction of Origins," 59.
- 27 Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, "Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour? Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and the Chinese-American Autobiographical Controversy," in *Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior: A Casebook*, ed. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 39.
- 28 Smaro Kamboureli, "The Politics of the Beyond: 43 Theses on Autoethnography and Complicity," in *Asian Canadian Writing beyond Autoethnography*, ed. Eleanor Ty and Christi Verduyn (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008), 38.
- 29 Judy Yung, Gordon H. Chang, and Him Mark Lai, eds., *Chinese American Voices: From the Gold Rush to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), xix.
- 30 Huie Kin, *Reminiscences* (Beijing: San Yu Press, 1932). Quotations that follow come from this edition rather than Yung et al., *Chinese American Voices*.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 115.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 27–8.
- 33 Chin, "Come All Ye," 8. For a critique of Chin, see Patricia Marby Harrison, "Genocide or Redemption? Asian American Autobiography and the Portrayal of Christianity in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* and Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*," *Christianity and Literature* 46.2 (1997): 145–68.
- 34 Saum Song Bo in Yung et al., *Chinese American Voices*, 56.
- 35 Scott Seligman makes the case that Wong is the first to use the term "Chinese American." See Scott Seligman, *The First Chinese American: The Remarkable Life of Wong Chin Foo* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), xii. Wong founded a New York newspaper called the *Chinese American* in 1883 and the Chinese Equal Rights League in 1892. My research suggests that the term was used as early as September 26, 1854, in an article entitled "Chinese American Citizens," printed in the *New York Courier*, and then reprinted in *Littell's Living Age* 43 (October 7, 1854): 125–6. The article argues against allowing Chinese immigrants to apply for naturalized citizenship. Hence the spirit in which these two sources use the term differs enormously.
- 36 Wong Chin Foo in Yung et al., *Chinese American Voices*, 76.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 73.
- 38 Lee, "Why I Am Not a Heathen," in *Chinese American Voices*, 82–4.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 82.
- 40 The U.S. Congress did not repeal Chinese Exclusion until 1943, when it seemed prudent to include immigrants from an allied country during World War II.
- 41 Jee Gam in Yung et al., *Chinese American Voices*, 87.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 90.
- 43 Lee Chew, "Life Story of a Chinaman," in *The Life Stories of Undistinguished Americans as Told by Themselves*, ed. Hamilton Holt (New York: Holt, 1906), 292.
- 44 Wen Bing Chung in Yung et al., *Chinese American Voices*, 34.
- 45 Wong Hau-hon in Yung et al., *Chinese American Voices*, 41.
- 46 Elizabeth Wong in *ibid.*, 91.

- 47 David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).
- 48 "Detention in the Wooden Building" in Yung et al., *Chinese American Voices*, 121.
- 49 Steven Yao identifies "many 'flaws' of composition displayed in these poems, violations of the rules for rhyme and tone distribution, as well as even more basic errors of character usage." See Steven Yao, *Foreign Accents: Chinese American Verse from Exclusion to Postethnicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 77.
- 50 Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," 35.
- 51 Robert F. Sayre, "Autobiography and the Making of America," in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 147.
- 52 Michael M. J. Fischer, *Emergent Forms of Life and the Anthropological Voice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 182.

Stage Orientalism and Asian American Performance from the Nineteenth into the Twentieth Century

JOSEPHINE LEE

Nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American theater produced a set of distinctive and persistent representations of Asians and Asian Americans. For instance, Henry Grimm's 1879 farce *The Chinese Must Go* caricatures Chinese immigrants as dealing opium and scheming in barely intelligible English against white men, while David Belasco's 1900 one-act *Madame Butterfly: A Tragedy of Japan* (based on John Luther Long's 1898 short story and inspiring Giacomo Puccini's 1904 opera *Madama Butterfly*) associates Japan with spectacular settings, childlike and alluring women, and interracial romance. These stage Orientals, played in "yellowface" makeup, wigs, and costume by non-Asian actors, serve as prototypes for contemporary racial stereotypes of submissive, exotic Asian women and deviant, dangerous Asian men.

How did these representations of the Oriental as seductive foreigner or undesirable intruder originate? How did they impact the conditions under which actual Asians performed onstage? This chapter explores the varied modes of Orientalism, from the seemingly benign to the openly hostile, that defined the prevailing theatrical depictions of Asians and Asian Americans in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. We will first examine plays by white American and Europeans that staged both exotic fantasies of Asia and comic mockeries of the Asian immigrant. We then look at how such representations of racial difference, whether exotically attractive or repulsive, might have been reaffirmed or challenged by Asian performers, such as those put on commercial display by the impresario P.T. Barnum. Whether staged in theaters or other venues such as music halls, circuses, museums, or private gatherings, these instances of nineteenth-century stage Orientalism and early Asian performance were played before primarily white audiences. Enacted during a time in which Asians were barred from immigration and naturalization (beginning with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882), these examples

provide insight into the place of Asia within the American racial imagination and the role of theater in focusing public opinion toward Asians and Asian Americans. Their history informs Asian American performance, both in its very early incarnations and in the post-1965 rise of contemporary Asian American theaters.

Oriental Fantasies on the American Stage

Significant numbers of immigrants from Asia began to arrive in the United States in the later part of the nineteenth century, but imagined versions of the “Orient” were an integral part of American culture long before. For well more than a century, Asia had already inspired European and American dramatists. For instance, eighteenth-century translations of the thirteenth-century dramatist Ji Junxiang’s *Great Revenge of the Orphan of Zhao* were popular, inspiring Voltaire’s *L’Orphelin de la Chine* (1753) and Irish playwright Arthur Murphy’s *Orphan of China* (1756). From the “splendid Chinese tent” of the Ravel family’s pantomime *Kim – Kal or the Misfortunes of Ventilator* (1852) onward, American audiences were familiar with the Oriental themes found in European and British pantomimes, melodramas, and extravaganzas, where elaborate spectacles, fantastical plots, and whimsical characterizations were regularly accompanied by music and dance. U.S. theaters saw a variety of American plays as well as successful imports from the London stage such as W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan’s *The Mikado* (1885), Sidney Jones’s *The Geisha* (1896), and George Dance’s *A Chinese Honeymoon* (1902). These visually impressive yet superficial treatments used Oriental locales as opportunities for staging conventional romantic plots and songs amidst grand visual effects. Shows such as the 1868 burlesque-extravaganza *Humpty-Dumpty Abroad* were celebrated for such moments as a “Chinese lantern festival,” hailed by one reviewer as “the most effective piece of stage-grouping ever seen in this city.”¹ An 1875 version of Jules Verne’s *Around the World in Eighty Days* included scenes set in India, with a “Hindoo” bungalow, a “procession of Brahmins and worshippers” at the “Great Religious Festival of the Suttee” that led to a “startling” pyre and “Grand Funeral Pageant.”² R. H. Burnside’s 1909 extravaganza *A Trip to Japan* at the Hippodrome followed a plot in which “the Japanese hire a circus to disguise their shipments of submarines back to their homeland,” and was full of stunning effects including a steamship, a “Feast of Lanterns,” and two waterfalls.³ A variety of Oriental settings allowed for fantastic escapes from reality. In *Prince Kam; or, A Trip to Venus* (1894), Prince

Kam of Tibet “takes a flying machine to visit the King of Mars” where he falls in love with Venus, who follows him back to Earth.⁴ The protagonist of *Ski-Hi* (1908) travels “to the Orient and then Jupiter.”⁵ These glamorous settings were not limited to the ever-popular China and Japan. In J. Cheever Goodwin and Woolson Morse’s *Wang*, which opened in Broadway in 1891, the title character is the comic and conniving regent of Siam. Chicago saw the 1905 musical *The Isle of Bong Bong*, set in the Philippines, which featured a “Sultan of the floating island of Bong-Bong.”⁶ Occasionally locales were blended together, as in the so-called Chinese-Japanese opera *The Koreans*, which opened and closed the same week in 1898. Its hero “George Washington Tree” proposes to his beloved by “writing on the cuff of a shirt that he accidentally sends to a Chinese laundry.” Subsequently, the owner of the laundry goes to Korea; George follows him there and “organizes a union for ancestor worshippers.”⁷

These theatrical travels capitalized on a much larger trend. Beginning in the seventeenth century, Europeans and Americans embraced the fantasy of China as a land of exotic excess, and actively imitated as well as imported Chinese objects such as porcelain and lacquerware. A similar “Japan craze” took hold after the 1853 opening of Japan to the West by Commodore Matthew Perry, fostering an active market in screens, fans, kimonos, and other goods. The consumption of Asian objects went hand in hand with works such as *The Mikado*. Gilbert and Sullivan’s most popular opera made multiple references to the craze for Japanese imports, beginning with a chorus of “gentlemen of Japan” who identify themselves “[o]n many a vase and jar/[o]n many a screen and fan.” American audiences were inspired to reenact these “queer and quaint” characters through buying Japanese objects for “Mikado rooms,” sheet music, or photographs.⁸

The racial transformation that characterized yellowface acting was made possible by the now-commonplace presence of Asian objects, dress, and décor in the American home. Donning makeup and costume in order to play Oriental characters became a trend offstage as well as on. First imported as luxury items, by the late nineteenth-century porcelain, screens, fans, and silks manufactured in Asia for Western consumption were no longer rarities. As mass-produced Chinese and Japanese things became popular signs of middle-class prosperity, they were increasingly associated with cheap goods and imitative style. This devaluation conditioned the overall perception of Asia and influenced how it was presented both onstage and off. Yellowface could be enacted easily – through the use of now ubiquitous objects such as fans or kimonos – and dispensed with just as quickly.

Yellowface

These theatrical engagements with Asia promoted an imaginary cultural contact that was superficial at best. Most characterizations of Asian people remained for the most part unabashedly inauthentic. In comic musicals, for instance, nonsensical renditions of Asian words proved a predictable source of humor. The popular 1887 collaboration by Reginald De Koven and Harry B. Smith, *The Begum: A Hindoo Comic Opera*, included the characters Howja-Dhu, Pooteh-Wehl, Klahm-Chowdee, Myhnt-Jhuleep, Jhust-Naut, and a quartet of young women named Tafeh, Kahra-Mel, Nougat, and Bon-Bon.⁹ George Ade's Chicago production *The Sho-Gun* (1904) was set in the imaginary Korean capital of "Ka-Choo" with characters such as Hanki-Panki, Omee-Omi, and Hunni-Bun.¹⁰ The creators of *Wang, Goodwin and Morse*, also wrote *Panjandrum* (1893) set in the Philippines. Producer William DeWolf Hopper said that this title – also the name of a character, the king of a savage tribe – was determined as a marketing trick in order to brand the production as his own: "We purposely called the play by the meaningless syllables, 'Panjandrum.' Rather than stumble over 'Panjandrum,' the public asked for seats for Hopper, as we intended they should."¹¹

These exotic images were followed by a much more overtly political and hostile stage Orientalism. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, yellowface representations of "John Chinaman" joined the many comic types (including Irish, Dutch, and Jewish as well as African American) that made blackface minstrelsy so popular. In addition to the caricatures of Zip Coon and Jim Crow, songs, comedy skits, and stump speeches featured queued coolie figures speaking in nonsense words and eating dogs, cats, mice, and rats.¹² Popular Irish songs also satirized marriages between Chinese men and Irish women, reflecting fears of interracial union that might threaten the status of working-class whites and immigrant Irish.¹³ Full-length plays enlarged the theatrical life of these types. *The Chinese Must Go* begins in a California kitchen with Ah Coy and Sam Gin washing dishes and smoking opium, as Ah Coy gleefully predicts an economic takeover: "By and by white man catchee no money; Chinaman catchee heap money; Chinaman workee cheap, plenty work; white man workee dear, no work – sabee?"¹⁴ These Chinese men presume to outdo the "white man" at both work and thrift, exploiting American capitalism from the inside until, as Ah Coy says, "[b]y and by, no more white workingman in California; all Chinamen – sabee?" The protagonist, Frank Blaine, calls the Chinese "parasites" that suck "blood out of every State in the Union, destroying Uncle Sam's sinews and muscle."¹⁵

During the course of the play these Chinese characters also smuggle in young Chinese women for prostitution, worship idols, and enslave young white women with opium.

Titled with the anti-Chinese slogan of Denis Kearney and the Workingmen's Party of California, *The Chinese Must Go* was most likely confined to the amateur stages of anticoolie clubs, its one recorded production apparently resulting in "thunderous applause," at the Bird Cage Theatre in Tucson, Arizona.¹⁶ But in professional productions such as Joseph Jarrow's Broadway melodrama, *The Queen of Chinatown* (1899), the Chinese were also portrayed as threats. Anti-Chinese works fixated on the Chinese man as dangerous to white labor and domesticity. Bret Harte and Mark Twain's 1876 *Ah Sin* features a mischievous Chinese character, famously portrayed by white actor Charles Parsloe,¹⁷ who delights in imitating white behavior. Hired as a manservant, Ah Sin tells the audience: "May be me mighty poor servant – don't know how. Well, me watchee-watchee – do everything see Mellican man do – pretty soon me learnee." Another character calls him a "mental vacuum," "a Chinaman to the marrow in one thing, the monkey faculty of imitating," and his employer comments on his interest in theater: "My Chinaman is always meddling around the shows and picking up something or other, and he mimics everything he sees there." Although humorous in nature, the Chinese immigrant's imitation of American ways – in the workplace, at home, even on the stage – threatens to blur the color line. Ah Sin's mimetic behavior reminds audiences of the assimilative potential of the Chinese man even while he reaffirms his racial difference through comic antics and linguistic "jabbering."¹⁸

As evidenced in Ah Sin's stated intent to "catchee plenty goldee, mally llish girl, go back to China,"¹⁹ the Chinese were compared to Irish immigrant men, who also occupied an uncertain place in the social hierarchy. George M. Baker's *New Brooms Sweep Clean* (1871) featured an Irish character impersonating a Chinese cook, who is then chastised by his fellow Irishman: "O Pat, Pat! How could yez? . . . Ye's sowld yer birthright for a mess of broken china."²⁰ The Irish as well as the Chinese male immigrant was figuratively emasculated by his lack of social power and consignment to lowly domestic labor. But though the Anglo-Saxon racial hierarchy excluded the Irish as "Celts" and as Roman Catholics, the eventual incorporation of the Irish immigrant into "whiteness" contrasted with the continued alienation of the Chinese, as is portrayed in T.S. Denison's 1895 farce *Patsy O'Wang*. The title character, "born of an Irish father and a Chinese mother," becomes the "true Irishman" when he drinks whiskey but transforms into the Chinese Chin Sum when he drinks tea. Ultimately Chin Sum sees the advantages of remaining as Patsy; outfoxing all efforts to

make him drink tea, he declares his intention to go into politics: "Me ambition is to be an alderman and die beloved and respected by all."²¹

The Chinese were not the only subjects of anti-Asian feeling; in the early twentieth century Japan's growing imperial power increasingly came under suspicion, as referenced in works such as the 1912 Chicago production of *The Girl at the Gate*, whose plot includes a beautiful Japanese spy who steals plans for the Panama Canal's fortifications. Notably, *The Girl at the Gate* also includes stage directions that comment on a more domestic version of the "Yellow Peril": a Japanese character who is "cringingly humble" and white character who comment that the Japanese are "bright alright but they don't remain servants!" and finding that "There's only one thing worse than a Jap! ... Another Jap."²²

These later portrayals of reviled Asian immigrants might at first seem incompatible with the earlier tradition of exotic, spectacular Orientalism onstage. Yet both modes of typecasting continued apace. Even after anti-Asian sentiment was formalized through the exclusion laws, spectacular dramas set in China, such as George C. Hazelton and Harry J. Benrimo's *The Yellow Jacket* (1912), Paul Carus's *K'Ung Fu Tze* (1915), Jean H. Brown's *The Honorable Mrs. Ling's Conversion* (1920), or Clare Kummer's *Chinese Love* (1922), remained popular, as did revivals of *The Mikado* or Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*. Well into the twentieth century, minstrelsy, vaudeville, and other musical theater continually revived both racist humor and Orientalist kitsch. For instance, Dave Montgomery and Fred Stone's Broadway success *Chin-Chin* (1914) was set in a "Peking toyshop" populated by tin soldiers and painted dolls, and included the British pantomime figures of Aladdin and the Orientalized "Widow Twankey" as well as two Chinese mannequins Chin Hop Hi and Chin Hop Lo; this musical notably combined minstrel and ragtime numbers such as "Ev'ry chink goes just as dippy as a coon from Mis-si-si-ip" set to the tune of the "Ragtime Temple Bells."²³

The virulent racial stereotyping of Asian immigrant labor placed Oriental exoticism in a more negative light. Through their attacks on Chinese labor, plays such as *The Chinese Must Go* also articulated anxieties about the lack of discipline and thrift in white men who, in the words of Ah Coy, "eaty too muchee, drinky too muchee, and talkee too muchee" as well as "keep wif and children."²⁴ By exploiting these weaknesses, the Chinese men were seen as sexual competitors as their domestic labor allowed them into white homes and as they attracted the romantic interest as well as the missionary zeal of white women (as evidenced in the notoriety of the 1909 murder of Elsie Sigal, commonly known at the time as the "Chinatown trunk mystery").²⁵ These

dramatic fixations on the profligacy of white men and the sexual frailty of white women, centered on the figure of the Oriental, manifested basic concerns about American democracy and government. Ronald Takaki's *Iron Cages* describes how, at a formative stage of nation building and industrialization, the founding fathers and prominent nineteenth-century thinkers constructed ideal citizens through republican ideologies that promoted "rational, ascetic, and self-governing individuals" and eschewed luxury, excess, and emotion.²⁶ The divided aims of self-renunciation and profiteering informed American racial ideology, as those perceived as "Others" – African Americans, American Indians, and Mexican and Asian immigrants – were simultaneously incorporated as part of the workforce and rejected as a legitimate part of the social body. The anxieties surrounding the Chinese immigrant, then, lie not only in his "heathen" difference but also his association with luxury and excess, threatening American masculine vigor and leading white women into sexual and moral turpitude.

Anti-Asian sentiment did not supplant the older tradition of Orientalist splendor, but rather recast Asian extravagance as the corruption of American discipline and virtue. Chinatown, which became popular places for white tourism in the 1890s, could be a romantic setting for musicals such as Charles Hoyt and Percy Gaunt's 1891 *A Trip to Chinatown*; here stage directions call for a character to enter "in white Chinese dress" and perform a "Chinese specialty," and for several months the cast included acclaimed dancer Loie Fuller performing her "butterfly wing" dance.²⁷ But central to a later play such as Walter Campbell's 1905 *A Night in Chinatown* were fears of white women becoming addicted to opium and turning into prostitutes or concubines. As Esther Romeyn notes, Chinatown became associated with secrecy and danger as well as the evils of a commodity culture that promised "a lifestyle of luxury, sensuality, and abandon."²⁸ In Campbell's play, the scheming villain enlists the help of Moy Key, a "Chinese highbinder," to kidnap the heroine, bring her into the heart of Chinatown, and let down her virtuous defenses. Other white female characters are already lost to decadent Orientalism, as evidenced by their opium addiction and appearance in Chinese dresses.²⁹

Given the prevalence of so many Orientalist fantasies – whether of seductive geishas or of scheming villains – any sense of reality about actual Asian American experiences might seem lost. Yet references to the specific legal and political conditions under which Chinese and other Asian immigrants lived and worked are made even in this history of stage Orientals. Twain and Harte's *Ah Sin*, for instance, concludes with a courtroom scene in which Ah Sin's inability as a Chinese man to testify in court becomes significant. A more

substantive example might be found in Francis Power's *The First Born*, which successfully premiered at the Alcazar Theatre in San Francisco on May 3, 1897, with subsequent productions in New York and London. Francis Powers and producer David Belasco included a realistic Chinatown setting, Chinese costumes, Cantonese phrases, and other atmospheric effects such as incense, causing the reviewer of *The New York Journal* to complain about "small whiffs of sickening, nauseating odor that was burned for atmospheric and not for seweristic reasons": "The theatre was bathed in this hideous tinkative odor of incense, and during the long overture, you sat there getting fainter and fainter."³⁰ There were even Chinese actors used as extras; perhaps the first Asian American to appear in an American play was Kim Poon, the playmate of the doomed "first born" son of the protagonist Chang Wang.³¹ The heroic plot and elevated language contrasted with open hostility and ridicule of Chinese immigrants expressed in other plays. Clearly *The First Born* created some sympathy for its central characters, as suggested by a review of the 1908 revival at the Alcazar. The reviewer comments at first that audiences might experience "a shock" at seeing matinee idol Bertram Lytell dressed as a "high binder" ("His clothes are mean and common; he is a cooly [*sic*]"), but then praises Lytell's portrayal of the bereaved father Chang Wang: "The flowery speech of the oriental does not rob his lines of their penetrating power, but rather increases it and makes it lofty and epic." This praise suggests that Lytell to some degree humanized his Chinese role: "As Chang Wang he is all man – though yellow with the tint of the Mongolian."³²

Though sympathetic toward its leading characters, *The First Born* did little to dispel either the stage Chinaman or myths of Chinatown as exotic and illicit. It featured comic business and melodramatic conflict with "tong wars" between rival associations, women of ill repute, and a final scene in which the villain is killed with a hatchet. Yet, in addition to delivering more heroic characterizations, the play also drew attention to the everyday reality of Chinese immigrants in a short discussion of immigration restrictions faced by these characters. One character says that he came "disguised as an Indian, a savage race much favored by the white devils," and expresses his feeling that the United States treats American Indians much more kindly than the Chinese: "This government, I am told, not only feeds and clothes them, but allows them to ride free passage throughout this land, while I, a subject of the oldest of civilized nations, would hardly be permitted to walk."³³ Another tells of a friend who entered the United States disguised as his twin brother, and the men laugh at immigration officials as "barbarians who cannot tell us from each other."³⁴ These brief moments in which Chinese characters cogently

comment on their American lives suggest a political awareness rarely afforded to stage Orientals at this time.

Asian Performers on the American Stage

Asian immigrant laborers faced increasing ambivalence or open hostility as concerns over a more permanent Asian American population grew. In contrast, Asian performing artists in the United States, seen as novelty acts and temporary visitors, received a warmer reception. Krystyn Moon has detailed how despite the exclusion laws, “the ability of Asian actors to travel in and out of the United States was rather stable” with a precedent set by the 1883 case *In re Ho King*. Ho King, an opera singer presumably from Guangdong Province, was denied entrance by authorities in Portland, Oregon under the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. However, the federal court sided with Ho King because “it believed that his work was not of a physical nature and did not compete with white laborers.” Though the subsequent exceptions to Asian exclusion laws (teachers, students, merchants, diplomats, and tourists) did not include performers, by the early decades of the twentieth century the Immigration Bureau had set up a system that allowed “vaudeville acts from nations affected by exclusionary legislation to enter the United States under bond for up to three years, which remained in effect through World War II.”³⁵

Some Asian performers performed primarily for immigrant audiences. Daphne Lei argues for the importance of Cantonese opera to early Chinese communities in America, rather than just to white American audience members who tended to find the music discordant and the action unintelligible. For these settlers in nineteenth-century California, familiar historical and mythological stories eased nostalgia and reinforced national identity.³⁶ But much more often, Asians were put onstage for the benefit of white spectators, and their performances were strongly framed by assumptions about their racial and cultural difference. Even though these performances presumably allowed for a more authentic representation of Asian people than did the practice of yellowface acting, these Asians were displayed in ways that, for the most part, objectified them as exotic novelties or limited the scope of their talents.

In 1834 the “Chinese Lady” Afong Moy appeared “richly dressed in the Chinese Costume” in various New York venues elaborately decorated with Chinese export goods.³⁷ Later reports of a “Chinese Lady” (whether Moy or another woman is uncertain) at New York’s Temple of the Muses in 1845 described her as talking and counting in Chinese and eating with chopsticks, which “render[ed] the exhibition highly interesting to lovers of curiosities.”³⁸

The Philadelphia Centennial of 1876 and the 1893 Worlds' Columbian Exposition in Chicago both featured exhibits of Chinese and Japanese objects and culture. In Chicago there was no official Chinese exhibit, as China protested the 1892 Geary Law renewing restrictions on Chinese immigration placed by the 1882 Exclusion Act.³⁹ However, an exhibit was leased to "patriotic and commercially interested Chinese" that included a theater, joss house, bazaar, tea garden, and café. Visitors could drink tea, listen to Chinese music, watch a play "identically the same as given in the larger cities in China," and view "a Chinese lady and two children, a little girl 2 ½ years old and a baby boy 11 months of age."⁴⁰ Japan's much more elaborate exhibit was funded by a Meiji government eager to promote exports; it featured a elaborate structure, Ho-ö-den (Phoenix Hall), with a pavilion built by Japanese carpenters who themselves became objects of intense curiosity. *Harpers* commented "It seems almost a pity that these carpenters could not be kept at work all during the fair."⁴¹ Japanese artisans also were a major attraction at cultural exhibitions such as the "Native Japanese Villages" in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston in 1886 and 1887, where their reception was heavily influenced by the popularity of works such as *The Mikado*.⁴²

The exhibit of actual Asian people did have the potential to disrupt Orientalist fantasies. However, even though these displays allowed for closer proximity between non-Asian spectators and Asian people, this cultural contact was heavily circumscribed by preconceptions about race and culture. "High Caste Hindoos," for example, were part of Phineas T. Barnum's 1884 "Grand Ethnological Congress of Nations": a "human Menagerie" consisting "of a male and female of every race, tribe and nation that can be procured."⁴³ Of particular interest were physical attributes that seemed to confirm clear delineations of cultural and racial difference. What attracted the greatest curiosity at the Peale Museum was a "collection of wrappings used to bind the feet of Chinese women and the tiny shoes and slippers that fit bound feet."⁴⁴ Afong Moy's "astonishing little feet" were singled out for special attention, as were those of "Miss Pwan-Yekoo, the Chinese Belle" in the "Living Chinese Family" displayed in Barnum's "Chinese Museum," which opened in 1850: "She is so pretty, so arch, so lively, and so graceful, while her minute feet are wondrous!"⁴⁵ While the practice of foot-binding associated China with a repressive and antiquated civilization, other Asian cultures were regarded as much more primitive. The "Philippine Village," in which approximately 1,200 Filipinos were exhibited, was one of the most popular exhibits at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. At the fair were exhibited Igorots (from Bontoc, Suyoc, and other regions), Manobos, Moros, Visayans, and Negritos in their "natural

environment,” as well as the Philippine Scouts and Constabulary. While the musicianship of the Constabulary Band seemed to confirm the potential for Filipino progress under American imperial control, the exhibit drew the most attention for its presentations of Igorot dog-eating and revealing native dress that demonstrated the inhabitants’ reputed savagery and barbarism.⁴⁶

These displays allowed audiences to assume some familiarity with Asian bodies, viewing them firsthand rather than through the representations of theatrical yellowface. But this presumed authenticity was often mobilized to confirm existing stereotypes, as American and British impresarios profited from accentuating racial difference. Barnum’s exhibits memorably combined the fetishism of racial difference and physical abnormality. Most famous were the “Siamese twins” Chang and Eng Bunker.⁴⁷ These ethnically Chinese conjoined twins were brought to the United States from Thailand in 1829 by Robert Hunter, a British merchant. They toured the United States and England with great success, contracting with Barnum to appear at the American Museum in 1860 and then again in 1868 at the George Wood’s museum at Broadway and 30th Street.⁴⁸ Other Barnum displays included “The Chinese Giant” (with other Giants such as “the Irish Giant,” and “the French Giant”).⁴⁹ Chang Yu Sing, standing at least seven foot six, was brought from London to America by Barnum for the then-exorbitant price of \$500 a month. In 1887 Barnum put on display the so-called Sacred Hairy Family of Burmah, thirty-year-old Moug-Phoset and his seventy-year-old-mother Mah-Phoon, noted for their facial hair; visitors were permitted “the closest inspection” and encouraged “to touch them and try to obtain some of the good luck that they had once given to Burmese royalty.”⁵⁰ The success of such exhibitions spawned new instances of yellowface performance. Barnum’s exhibits included the dwarf “Che Mah Che Sang,” wearing Chinese-style dress and a queue reportedly thirteen feet long, even though he was a London Jew.⁵¹ The African American performer Thomas Dilward, who at thirty-five inches tall was called the “Tom Thumb of Africa,” also took on the moniker “Japanese Tommy” in order to lend interest to his minstrel act.⁵² Capitalizing on the popularity of Chang and Eng Bunker’s tours, blackface minstrel shows also made “Siamese twins” part of their comic routines.⁵³

Touring acrobats from China and Japan were enormously popular in variety theater, circus, and other venues. In 1866 and 1867 European and American impresarios recruited at least seven Japanese troupes to perform outside of Japan in the United States, London, New Zealand, and Australia.⁵⁴ Such troupes as Risley and Maguire’s Imperial Japanese Troupe (with its famous child acrobat Hamaikari Nagakichi, nicknamed “Little All Right”), the

Flying Dragon Troupe of Japanese Acrobats (also known as the Red Dragon Troupe or Marshall and Doyle's Mikado Troupe), the Fusiyama Troupe of Japanese Acrobats, and Satsuma's Royal Japanese Troupe toured throughout the United States.⁵⁵ Their acts included gymnastics, aerial acts, top spinning, balancing, magic, and foot juggling. Blackface minstrelsy was quick to capitalize on the popularity of Japanese acrobats, with at least eight major companies advertising some takeoff on the "jap-oh-knees," whether "The Flying Black Japs," described as "BALANCING, JUGGLING, TOP SPINNING, AND ENCHANTED LADDERS, HAM-SANDWICH-CELLAR-KITCHEN and his beautiful son ALL WRONG" or a group heralded simply by the single bold word "Jap."⁵⁶

The fact that these Japanese acrobats were in demand over many of their European or American counterparts seems quite complimentary. Edward Ziter notes that in Britain "early in the nineteenth century, native peoples began to be displayed as performers rather than spectacles in and of themselves" a change from ethnographic display reflecting "an emerging interest in what exotics *did* versus what exotics *were*."⁵⁷ However, these performers had limited opportunities. According to Gillian Rodger, Japanese acrobats had less career mobility than their European counterparts: "while some French, German, and Italian performers settled in the United States and married American women from circus families," there was "little indication that this was the case for Japanese performers" nor could they move from acrobatics into comedy, dance, or other musical roles as their European and American counterparts sometimes did.⁵⁸ For instance, both King Sarbro and Prince Satsuma, successful jugglers and acrobats for decades on the American variety stage, were excluded from the comic and burlesque afterpieces that ended each show, a limitation that meant that "as they aged, they were inevitably replaced by younger performers who were able to perform more spectacular feats of daring."⁵⁹

In 1880 several dancers from India, contracted by the impresario Augustin Daly as part of his opera *Zanina*, first performed to New York audiences; reviewers at first showed curiosity about these performers, but later found their dancing "monotonous" and bemoaned their dark skin. One commented that "the famous Nautch dancers were four little mulatto girls, who twisted their big ugly hands in the air with the grace of a cow and the animation of a China mandarin."⁶⁰ Though other "nautch" dancers continued in Barnum's circuses, street performances, and fairs, they never matched the popularity of the *bayadere* (Oriental dancing girl), a figure popular in European and American dance since Taglioni's ballet *La Dieu et la Bayadere*

(also called *The Maid of Cashmere*) premiered at the Paris Opera in 1830.⁶¹ For white American audiences, Asian performers were marked by their racial and cultural differences rather than individual skill and artistry. Such racial typecasting no doubt affected the careers of later Asian American performers, even those as versatile as the Chinese American vaudeville performer Lee Tung Foo, whose 1906 act at Keith's Theater in Providence, Rhode Island included a comedic monologue, a Cantonese song, Irish songs, and a drinking song "Im Tiefen Keller" ("In the Deep Cellar") in its original German.⁶²

Asian American Theaters Look Back

The interconnected history of stage Orientalism and Asian performers informs the making of Asian American theater, both in its very early incarnations – as we might consider the nineteenth-century performances of Chinese opera for Chinese audiences – and in contemporary productions. While spectacular images of exotic femininity and alien masculinity continue to be familiar in film and television as well as the American stage, post-1965 Asian American theater artists have directly commented on this legacy in plays such as Ping Chong's *Chinoiserie* (1995), David Henry Hwang's Tony-award-winning *M. Butterfly* (1988), and Naomi Iizuka's *36 Views* (2002). Chong's multimedia work juxtaposes the vitriolic portrayals of Grimm's *The Chinese Must Go* with historic commentary on the opium wars and a chilling account of the 1982 murder of Chinese American Vincent Chin. Through gender-bending characterizations and witty dialogue, Hwang's *M. Butterfly* deconstructs the sexist and colonialist underpinnings of Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, projecting its power dynamics onto a contemporary story of a twenty-year-long affair between a French diplomat and a Chinese spy. Iizuka's *36 Views* makes the case that the nineteenth-century fascination with Asian *objets d'art* still has a hold on present-day collectors and connoisseurs.

As well as challenging stereotypes, contemporary playwrights have also paid tribute to those early performers whose humanity was all but eclipsed by the repressive conditions of their display. Sun Mee Chomet's lively *Asiamnesia* (2008) includes at its center the figure of Afong Moy, whose silence speaks volumes to the play's central preoccupation with the continuing typecasting of Asian American actresses. Philip Kan Gotanda's expressionistic *I Dream of Chang and Eng* (2011) is a poignant meditation on the lives of Chang and Eng Bunker. Along with contemporary scholarship, these multifaceted artistic representations of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Asian performers

deepen our knowledge of American theater and illuminate distinctive histories otherwise obscured by the gaudy and flat surfaces of stage Orientalism.

Notes

- 1 Gerald Bordman, *American Musical Theatre: A Chronicle*. 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 37.
- 2 Ibid., 40.
- 3 Ibid., 294.
- 4 Ibid., 146.
- 5 Ibid., 283.
- 6 Ibid., 243.
- 7 Ibid., 181.
- 8 See Chapter 1, Josephine Lee, *The Japan of Pure Invention: Gilbert and Sullivan's The Mikado* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
- 9 Bordman, *American Musical Theatre*, 104.
- 10 Ibid., 235.
- 11 Ibid., 141.
- 12 Robert Lee, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 34.
- 13 Ibid., 76–7.
- 14 Dave Williams, *The Chinese Other 1850–1925: An Anthology of Plays* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America 1997), 99.
- 15 Ibid., 117.
- 16 See Hsin-yu Ou, “Chinese Ethnicity and the American Heroic Artisan in Henry Grimm’s *The Chinese Must Go* (1879),” *Comparative Drama* 44.1 (Spring 2010): 63–83.
- 17 See Sean Metzger, “Charles Parsloe’s Chinese Fetish: An Example of Yellowface Performance in Nineteenth-Century American Melodrama,” *Theatre Journal* 56 (2004): 627–51.
- 18 Williams, *The Chinese Other*, 58, 71, 82.
- 19 Ibid., 46.
- 20 Ibid., 22.
- 21 Ibid., 147.
- 22 Bordman, *American Musical Theatre*, 323.
- 23 Ibid., 346.
- 24 Williams, *The Chinese Other*, 99.
- 25 See Mary Ting Yi Lui’s fascinating account in *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery: Murder, Miscegenation, and Other Dangerous Encounters in Turn-of-the-Century New York City* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).
- 26 Ronald Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in 19th-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), ix.
- 27 Bordman, *American Musical Theatre*, 128–9.
- 28 Esther Romeyn, *Street Scenes: Staging the Self in Immigrant New York 1880–1924* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2008), 71.
- 29 Lui, *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery*, 84–5.

- 30 Romeyn, *Street Scenes*, 71.
- 31 Sheryl F. Nadler, "'The First Born' (1897): A Cultural, Historical, and Literary Study of Francis Powers and David Belasco's Unpublished Drama of Chinese Life in America," unpublished dissertation, Florida State University (1994). Also see Daphne Lei, "The Production and Consumption of Chinese Theatre in Nineteenth-Century California," *Theatre Research International* 28.3 (2003): 289–302; 300–1n32. Fong Get, who played a "Chinese grocer," appeared in the 1908 revival.
- 32 Walter Anthony, "Lyttell Is Strong in the 'First Born': Portrayal of Chinese High Binder Shows Chang Wang a Man Though Yellow," *San Francisco Call* 105.9 (December 9, 1908): 5.
- 33 Williams, *The Chinese Other*, 168.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Krystyn Moon, "The Rise of Asians and Asian Americans in Vaudeville, 1880s–1930s," *Asian Pacific American Collective History Project*. Online resource: <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/history/faculty/henryyu/APACHP/teacher/research/moon.htm> (accessed September 1, 2013).
- 36 See Daphne Lei, "The Production and Consumption of Chinese Theatre in Nineteenth-Century California," *Theatre Research International* 28.3 (2003): 289–302.
- 37 Krystyn R. Moon, *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850s–1920s* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press 2005), 61.
- 38 John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York before Chinatown* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 104.
- 39 Mari Yoshihara, *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 19.
- 40 Robert Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876–1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1984), 27–8.
- 41 Quoted in Yoshihara, *Embracing the East*, 20.
- 42 See Chapter 2, Lee, *The Japan of Pure Invention*.
- 43 Philip B. Kunhardt Jr., Philip B. Kunhardt III, and Peter W. Kunhardt, *P.T. Barnum: America's Greatest Showman* (New York: Knopf 1995), 296.
- 44 Lee, *Orientalism*, 28.
- 45 Moon, *Yellowface*, 61; Tchen, *New York before Chinatown*, 118.
- 46 Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns, *Puro Arte: Filipinos on the Stages of Empire* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 25–6.
- 47 See Joseph Andrew Orser, *The Lives of Chang and Eng: Siam's Twins in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2014).
- 48 Kunhardt et al., *P.T. Barnum*, 147.
- 49 Ibid., 259.
- 50 Ibid., 306.
- 51 Ibid., 289.
- 52 See Lee, *The Japan of Pure Invention*, 95–7.
- 53 Lee, *Orientalism*, 32.
- 54 Krystyn R. Moon, "Paper Butterflies: Japanese Acrobats in Mid-Nineteenth-Century New England," in *Asian Americans in New England: Culture and Community*, ed. Monica Chiu (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press 2009): 66–90, 72.
- 55 Moon, "Paper Butterflies," 74–6.

- 56 Robert Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 170.
- 57 Edward Ziter, *The Orient on the Victorian Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003), 97.
- 58 Gillian M. Rodger, *Champagne Charlie and Pretty Jemima: Variety Theater in the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 41.
- 59 *Ibid.*, 43.
- 60 Robinson Locke Scrapbook Covering the Life and Career of Augustin Daly. 1870–1920. Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library of the Performing Arts; quoted in Priya Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 56.
- 61 Marius Pepita used such a characterization for his well-known Russian ballet *La Bayadere* (1877). See Deborah Jowitt, *Time and the Dancing Image* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) and Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris*, 52–3.
- 62 Moon, *Yellowface*, 1; also see Moon, “Lee Tung Foo and the Creation of a Chinese American Vaudevillian,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 8.1 (February 2005): 23–48.

“I Seek Out Poems Now Incomplete”: Writing from the Angel Island Immigration Station

SUNN SHELLEY WONG

Many of the poems were written in black ink with calligraphy brushes. Within a few months of the immigration station’s opening, Commissioner North ordered the walls *repainted* to cover up what he considered graffiti. Undeterred, the poets began *carving around* the outlines of the Chinese characters and *hollowing out* the centers to create an *impression* of each word. The maintenance crew, ordered to *cover* the writing, *filled in* the words with putty before *applying a new coat of paint*. Although the putty and paint succeeded in *obliterating* many of the carved poems, they also served as *sealers* that helped to *preserve* the wood from further *deterioration*. Through the years, the *putty shrank* and the *paint cracked* to reveal the carved poems on the wall. Remarkably, the 200 poems are still visible today, having *survived* the several *layers* of paint, *natural deterioration*, *overwriting*, and *alterations* in the building.¹ (emphasis added)

– Erika Lee and Judy Yung

A stele can be defined as an object made of a specific material, but its objecthood is often constructed by multiple events, including the notion of an elusive original and the creation of later replacements.²

– Wu Hung

After successive waves of repainting, overwriting, alterations, and obliterations, what is it that “survives” for us to see? The descriptors that Lee and Yung mobilize in their account of the material history of the Cantonese-language poems inscribed by Chinese immigrants detained at the Angel Island immigration station from 1910 to 1940 mark moments in the making, unmaking, and remaking of meaning. The cumulative practices and effects of the successive overlays that have obscured, altered, or obliterated the material object of the wall inscriptions can be understood as “multiple events” that together comprise the complex and contingent “objecthood” of the inscriptions.³ That is, the literal way in which material overlays can obscure or obliterate the

wall writings finds a figurative counterpart in the historical sedimentation of linguistic, methodological, ideological, institutional, or discursive constructs that determine what or how we see.

If, today, Asian American literature is framed as a primarily Anglophone literary formation, how do we understand the place of the Cantonese-language⁴ Angel Island poems within the history and functioning of this formation? Asian American studies scholars (both readers and nonreaders of Chinese alike) generally acknowledge the poems as “important founding texts of Chinese American history/literature”⁵ that mark a “crucial milestone [in] the ongoing attempt to establish a canon of Asian American literature that can boast the authority of historical depth.”⁶ Within this broad consensus, the question of translation has until recently remained largely unexplored.⁷ What difference, then, might it make to engage the Angel Island poems within the frame of the original Sinitic language of composition instead of through English translations?⁸ What difference might it make, that is, to the kinds of meanings or institutional status that we attribute to these poems? In the mobilizing of meanings across languages, what gets redirected or displaced in transmission?⁹

The problematic transmission of meanings, however, takes place not only across languages but, also, across modes of performing meaning – in this case, between “writing as literature” and “writing *in situ*.”¹⁰ Whether through memorization and oral transmission or publication and circulation in manuscript form, writing as literature is meant to transcend the particular time, place, and circumstances of its creation. Writing *in situ*, by contrast, stresses the “idea of the beholder confronting material traces occupying real space and time.”¹¹ Part of a broader set of questions posed by Judith T. Zeitlin and Lydia H. Liu in their work on the relationship of writing to materiality in China, the distinction between writing as literature and writing *in situ* prompts a reexamination of the nature of both our textual objects of analysis and the corresponding responses that they elicit. Is a poem carved into a wall the same order of object as a poem printed on a page? Does the public reading of a poem inscribed on the wall of a detention center constitute the same order of experience as the private reading of a poem on the printed page? For what sorts of readers were these wall inscriptions intended? How do these two “technologies” for “producing and reproducing writing”¹² interpellate their respective reading publics?

The critical nexus of materiality and writing affords yet another standpoint from which to examine the Angel Island poems – that of language politics. The Chinese written language has long been a source of fascination for Europeans,

with much of that fascination deriving from what was (mis)understood as the pictorial or graphic basis of the construction of the written character. In the early twentieth century, Ezra Pound (through his editing and recasting of Ernest Fenollosa's "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry") launched this idea of an ideographic Chinese writing system into the American modernist literary firmament, where it continues to exert a gravitational pull on American readers' perceptions of Chinese script and poetry. As far as Pound was concerned, the "Chinese still use abbreviated pictures AS pictures, that is to say, Chinese ideogram does not try to be the picture of a sound, or to be a written sign recalling a sound, but it is still the picture of a thing."¹³

What Pound understood as an ideographic Chinese writing system is one in which "in the fashion of a rebus, a concept [is associated] with a skeletal picture or combination of vestigial pictures."¹⁴ In contrast, alphabetic languages have been seen as phonetically based systems "relating sign and sound in an almost wholly arbitrary manner."¹⁵ This arbitrariness, when viewed as an index of mobility and freedom, marks the superiority of phonetic over ideographic systems. What begins as a set of claims about language can be extended very quickly to form a broader set of claims about peoples, cultures, and their historical destinies. In the course of analyzing how the idea of materiality signifies in the discursive constitution of something called "China" or "Chineseness," Haun Saussy traces, for example, the intertwined story of Chinese writing and Hegelian theories of the directional course of world history – one that moves teleologically from east to west. For Hegel, the ideographic basis of the Chinese writing system presented "a great obstacle for the development of learning. . . . Instead of some 25 [alphabetical] signs, the Chinese must learn thousands."¹⁶ The Chinese were to be pitied for being weighed down by a writing system that "requires years of diligent reciting, copying and recopying" just "to learn [the characters'] shapes and pronunciations."¹⁷ As Saussy elaborates,

The ideogram is a necessary (though historically situated) element in Hegel's story of the emergence of human freedom and the language proper to it – the language of a "romantic" form of art that is able to present an image and at the same time suggest a content that goes far beyond, is actually incommensurable with, the image presented.¹⁸

To put it another way, the language proper to the emergence of human freedom must be able to speak in the language of the universal; unfortunately for the Chinese, a language that cannot transcend the "image presented" remains in perpetual bondage to the accents of particularity.

The politics of language at work here emerges from the entanglement of descriptive and ideological claims about the Chinese writing system, as well as the homologous extension of those claims to the people, culture, and history associated with that language. We don't have far to go to see how this discursive construction of the relative merits of writing systems can get mapped onto the bodies associated with them. How have the putative differences between ideographic and phonetic writing systems come to be mapped ideologically onto binary constructions such as that of east/west, particular/universal, matter/mind, immobility/mobility, nonmimetic/mimetic, or static/progressive, and what consequences accrue from the ongoing investment in such constructions? Framed by a hierarchical distinction between particular and universal knowledge, this supposed bondage to, or inability to transcend, the "image presented" can be translated, for example, into the contemporary discourse of the university (understood as the site of the putative disinterested pursuit of universal knowledge), as bondage to particular identities, and to a politics or a poetics grounded in those identities. Taking up the foreign language aspect of the Angel Island poems, then, entails grappling with not only the semantic content of the language of the poems but also a history of Western responses to, and uses of, both the Chinese language and "Chineseness."

In examining the Angel Island poems, then, just what is it that we are examining – the wall inscriptions *in situ* as they may have appeared to the detainees between 1910 and 1940; the poems currently on display at a restored Angel Island Immigration Station now designated a National Historic Landmark; the English translations of thirteen of the poems in the *Heath Anthology of American Literature*; founding texts for an Asian American literary tradition; examples of the "Chinese" language (and a concomitant "Chineseness") as it has been historically constructed by, and for, the West; or examples of "Chinese" poetry as constituted through the poetics of American literary modernism? Revisiting the Angel Island poems occasions questions about what the poems mean or signify and what different constituencies of readers need them to mean and signify at different historical moments, in different media, and across different geographical, cultural, and institutional spaces. What follows is a critical turn to a moment before the "creation of later replacements," that is, to the poems as literary acts *in situ*, in the extraliterary scene of detention on the island. The methodological orientation here takes its cue from Kenneth Burke's work on symbolic action – particularly in his essay "Literature as Equipment for Living." The premise is a simple one: the "poet is not poeticizing in the middle of nowhere; though his poem may be viewed purely within itself ('in terms

of' its internal consistency), it is also the act of an agent in a non-literary scene."¹⁹ To the opening scene then.

Scenes of Writing

The object of attention in Judith T. Zeitlin's discussion of writing *in situ* is a form of Chinese poetry called *tibishi* – "poems written on walls."²⁰ *Tibishi* could be found not only on the walls of public buildings such as temples, government buildings, and inns but, also, on natural objects including rocks, trees, and cliffs. Poetry written on walls is defined by "the mode in which such verse was produced, read, and collected."²¹ Zeitlin qualifies that assertion by noting that,

unlike an ordinary published poem, whose point of spatial origin is largely irrelevant and blurred by the promiscuous circulation of print, a *tibishi* always remains at least theoretically defined by a specific location in space. Even when a later transcription of *tibishi* is encountered in the printed pages of a book, the reader must imagine it located in a specific site.²²

For the Angel Island poems, it is the site of detention that infuses them with much of their social and collective meanings. Because the vast majority of the readership for the Angel Island poems will encounter them on the printed page instead of the detention center walls, what is to be gained by insisting on imagining them *in situ*? Do these poems undertake different kinds of symbolic or ideological work in relation to different reading publics?²³

Tibishi were private and spontaneous recordings of responses to the experience of a particular place. The writing left behind then becomes part of the experience of the place for future passersby and

might even elicit a new poem written in the same spot in response to the old one, producing a potentially infinite chain of responses (thus the phenomenon described in anecdotal literature and poetry of surfaces crammed to overflowing with inscriptions).²⁴

We don't know how Alexander Weiss, the park ranger who in 1970 stumbled across the Angel Island wall inscriptions, might have responded to the poems had he been able to read them or had his presence in the building been occasioned by involuntary detention, but we do know that he was astonished to see that "entire walls were covered with calligraphy."²⁵ Some of the poems themselves refer to "[o]ver a hundred" or to "tens of thousands of poems" crowding the walls of the detention center.²⁶ One former detainee, Mr. Ng, recalled the proliferation of poems written or inscribed not only on the walls

of the sleeping quarters but also in the bathroom, and in the hallways. He himself had once consigned a poem to the canvas underside of his bunk bed.²⁷

Composed with varying degrees of literary skill, the individual poems reveal a range of responses to the experience of detention. Because few of the recovered poems were signed, however, they yield no knowledge of actual individuals. Where a signature could be detected and deciphered, it generally consisted of only a surname or the name of a place of origin. A handful of poems are ostensibly signed with full names but it remains unclear whether or not these names are real or pseudonyms.²⁸ In two instances, the poems were even signed with the name of a group rather than an individual – the “Self-Governing Association” whose Anglicized name was the “Angel Island Liberty Association.” Considered in their entirety as a textual ensemble, however, the poems reveal a dynamic field of literary and social interaction. In their “Introduction” to *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island 1910–1940*, the volume editors describe the scene of writing in terms that echo Zeitlin’s description of the settings for *tibishi*: “The poets borrowed liberally from one another, repeating each other’s phrases and allusions. . . . There are also indications that some poems might have been written by one person and revised by another at some later date.”²⁹ Testimony from a former detainee fleshes out this observation and reveals how literary and social investments in the act of writing often made for spirited and contentious exchanges:

Sometimes when someone didn’t like what another person wrote, he would deface the poem, saying, “What a smart aleck, trying to write poetry like the others.” Sometimes people fought over poems. A lot of people there didn’t know how to write poetry. They weren’t highly educated, but they knew some of the rules of poetry. You can’t say the poems were great, but they expressed real feelings.³⁰

The character and the extent of the literary exchanges or intertextual practices evidenced in the poems have led critics to speak of the collective or collaborative nature of the wall inscriptions.³¹ The lack of authorial attribution no doubt also contributed to this sense of collective authorship. The detainee-writers often borrowed or replicated each other’s rhyming words and patterns, tropes, titles, allusions, or themes; added either written characters to existing lines of poetry or lines to existing poems; responded to, and extended, an idea or turn of phrase; referenced other poems as inspirational sources; and, when possible, placed the response-poem in close proximity to the original. As a matter of poetic convention, these intertextual practices

may derive in part from long-standing Chinese reading practices in which “the correct response to reading certain poems was to write a new poem matching the rhythms of the original.”³² Perhaps of more significance to the discussion here, though, is the way in which cultural practices can be refunctioned to fit current necessities.

To detain means to keep in confinement or under restraint; to delay a person or to keep him or her waiting. A poetics and a politics of detention emerge out of the spatial and temporal modes of alienation operating at the site of the Angel Island Immigration Station. The island location of the immigration processing facility was meant both to isolate Chinese detainees from family members or sponsors on the outside who might otherwise be able to provide coaching information to the detainees whose applications were considered suspect by the immigration authorities, and to thwart escape efforts. Detaining the Chinese on the island meant alienating them from not only the *socius* of the U.S. nation-state but, also, from the familial and social networks in which they had previously been embedded. The latter took two forms: the first involved separating family members upon arrival at the detention center, in part to prevent family members from colluding to produce matching testimony; the second alienation was initiated prior to the detainees’ arrival on Angel Island. In the face of the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882) and subsequent rounds of anti-Asian immigration legislation that made claiming direct descent from a U.S. citizen the most viable route to gaining entry, many would-be Chinese immigrants found themselves having to claim fictitious identities.

The consequent disarticulation of existing familial and communal bonds was part of the price of the ticket of admission for “paper sons” or “paper daughters” – a disarticulation that, in the case of the Chinese, compounded the emotional or psychic toll of physical separation from families and communities exacted by immigration in general. Assuming “paper” identities meant having to invent new genealogies and to dissociate from existing ones. Detainees seeking to gain entry under these circumstances were doubly dislocated insofar as they were literally separated from their family members and friends, and figuratively or legally alienated from their familial histories by virtue of their “paper” status. In one sense, we could say that even before the Angel Island writers became anonymous on the barrack walls, many were already without names insofar as they had had to surrender their real names in order even to get to Angel Island. New names, no names, and pen names all bear textual witness to the unmooring of personal and social identities in the liminal space-time of the island.

Viewed as a collaborative practice, the wall inscriptions index ongoing processes of disarticulation and rearticulation – both voluntary and involuntary. The frequency, for example, with which writers alluded to, or identified with, figures drawn from Chinese history or legend (poets, scholars, statesmen, and military leaders celebrated for their stoicism, resilience, and triumphs, in the face of harsh and unjust treatment) may tell us something about the detainees’ desires to delink themselves from their immediate circumstances.

We are as one, fellow sufferers with mutual sympathy.
Just like Confucius when he was surrounded at the state of Chen.³³

I leave word for my compatriots not to worry too much.
They mistreat us but we need not grieve.
Han Xin was straddled by a bully’s trousers yet became a general.
Goujian endured humiliation and ultimately avenged his wrong.³⁴

Operating in the manner of a trope often associated with the work of prison writers, these allusions and identifications enable the detainee writers to place themselves outside the oppressive and demoralizing coordinates of detention by generating “alternative maps of . . . cultural, social, and moral location.”³⁵ The detainee writers, however, are not so much alluding to, or identifying with, specific historical or legendary figures as they are alluding to, and identifying with, the situations in which those figures appeared. Here, Kenneth Burke’s analysis of the form and function of proverbs becomes especially instructive. Proverbs (and Burke would extend this to literature and other works of art as well) are strategies for naming (and dealing with) a situation that is either typical, or that recurs frequently enough “for people to need a word for it and to adopt an attitude towards it.”³⁶ In this light, invoking these figures from Chinese history and legend enables the detainees to simultaneously name the proverbial situation in which those figures are embedded and the contemporary situation in which the detainees are embedded – a naming that is “not developed out of ‘disinterested curiosity,’ but because the names imply a command” (what to expect, what to look out for).³⁷

Proverbs have a rhetorical function and are designed for a variety of purposes: consolation, vengeance, admonition, exhortation, charting, foretelling, solace, instruction, and promise.³⁸ Even a cursory glance at the Angel Island poems would yield multiple candidates for each of these categories. For example, under “charting,” we could include the kind of “sizing up” of the situation evident in these lines from poem #34: “For what reason must I sit in jail? / It is only because my country is weak and my family poor.” Under “vengeance”: “If there comes a day when I will have attained my ambition

and become successful,/ I will certainly behead the barbarians and spare not a single blade of grass”(#35). Under “exhortation”: “With a weak country, we must all join together in urgent effort./ It depends on all of us together to roll back the wild wave”(#39). Under “consolation” or “vengeance” (because a proverb can serve more than one purpose): “Since days of old, such has been the fate of heroes./ With extreme misfortune comes the composure to await an opportunity for revenge”(#59). The Angel Island poems are charged with social intent, and reading them in relation to their rhetorical function opens up the social and collective aspect of the meanings of these poems.

On the field of symbolic action, these poems offer a way to “organize and command the army of one’s thoughts and images, and to so organize them that one “imposes upon the enemy the time and place and conditions for fighting preferred by oneself.”³⁹ In the case of the Chinese immigrants detained on Angel Island, the preferred conditions for fighting may have required collective rather than individual action. The means for, and the fields of, battle in this case involved not only the jointly produced literary acts inscribed on the barrack walls but, also, the production and circulation of another less visible set of texts in the extraliterary scene encompassing the detention center and some racially discriminatory immigration policies. This less visible – in fact, deliberately obscured – textualization of intersubjective dynamics consisted of coaching texts for paper sons and daughters, and a variety of messages exchanged between detainees and their supporters on the outside. The messages generally consisted of additional coaching information to help buttress detainees’ genealogical claims, advice about how to address interrogators’ suspicions about possible false representations on the part of detainees, and encouragements or reassurances.

The collaborative agents in this collective drama around the struggle to gain inclusion included many of the detainees, their families, sponsors, and intermediaries in both China and the San Francisco Bay area, members of the Chinese kitchen staff at the immigration station, and officers of the Self-Governing Association. The association was dedicated to providing “mutual aid” and maintaining “self-order,” and the officers of the association were elected “from the people who had been detained the longest, those whose cases were on appeal and, on occasion, respected intellectuals.”⁴⁰ The association helped orient new arrivals, relayed messages between detainees and outside supporters, intervened in disputes between immigration authorities and detainees, arranged cultural events, and organized classes for the children. Through these activities, “the association was able to provide a social structure that could survive and sustain its transient membership.”⁴¹ Because

the Chinese kitchen workers were able to move freely between the island and the mainland, they were recruited (and paid a small fee) to smuggle in messages and to deliver them to association officers during the course of meals in the dining hall. Keenly aware of how the discovery of such messages would jeopardize a detainee's case, association officers were fully prepared to resist the confiscation of such messages.⁴² The association's program of action was nothing if not the concrete social manifestation of a strategy for dealing with a situation – “what to expect, what to look out for.”

The act of inscribing poems on the barrack walls creates a “moment in time around which [a] community can constitute itself,”⁴³ a formation that might appropriately be called a “community of time.”⁴⁴ Accordingly, the wall inscriptions might be usefully characterized as occasional poems – that is, poems occasioned by, and produced at the moment of, detention. By virtue of being occasional poems, the Angel Island wall inscriptions are grounded in relations of immediacy, in the social textures of contemporaneity. Contemporaneity, here, refers to a mode of social proximity involving people “who have been exposed to the same influences and [been] marked by the same events and changes,” people who can then be said to “belong to the same generation. . . . This form of belonging together is a whole that combines something acquired and a common orientation.”⁴⁵ On the field of symbolic action, the wall inscriptions (with their varied expressions of indignation, anger, lament, sadness, resolve, resignation, and hope) may have functioned as a technology of social belonging in which the “surfaces crammed to overflowing with inscriptions” both secured the detainees' presence in the social memory of their fellows, and adumbrated potential forms of social affiliation beyond the confines of detention.

As writing that is left behind, a *tibishi* is past-oriented in the sense that it provokes its reader to reflect on, and to lament, the absences and losses occasioned by the passing of time.⁴⁶ In testifying “to the fact that someone else once stood in the exact same spot,” a *tibishi* confronts the reader with the earlier writer's absence.⁴⁷ The spatial and temporal conditions under which *tibishi* and the Angel Island inscriptions were produced and consumed differ markedly. Both the producer and the consumer of *tibishi* were travelers with the freedom to randomly record, or stumble across, a private inscription in a public place. The meanings of mobility, chance, private, and public, however, are radically reconstituted for those held in detention. In the detention barracks, the reader may be an on-site witness to the inscribing of the poem, rather than a later visitor to the site of the inscription. It is not chance that brings the Angel Island writer and reader to the same spot but, rather, the regulatory mechanisms of

the state in the form of discriminatory and exclusionary immigration laws. In the physical setting of the carceral space, the customary meanings of private or public no longer obtain. The act of inscribing a poem could never be entirely private, and the inscribed poem was never entirely public – generally only available to the other detainees in the men's barracks.⁴⁸ Standing on the exact same spot as the original writer more likely testifies to spatiotemporal proximity than to distance, and to contemporaneity and copresence than to pastness and absence.

The production of contemporaneity, or a community of time, has to be read against the political and discursive backdrop of temporal constructions of racial otherness in the early decades of the twentieth century. In his well-known critique of the epistemological foundations of anthropology, Johannes Fabian argues that anthropology, as a “science of other men in another time,” is “a discourse whose referent has been removed from the present of the speaking/writing subject.”⁴⁹ That is, through a process of temporal distancing (“allochronism”), the Western anthropologist denies “coevalness” to the cultural or racial Other. This denial of coevalness, or copresence, was a feature of a scientific discourse on evolutionary hierarchies that helped justify restrictive U.S. immigration policies – one's fellow citizens, it was believed, had to be one's evolutionary peers. Not surprisingly, then, given the belief that China “lived more than a millennium in the past” and that, furthermore, the Chinese had already “reached the end of their evolutionary road,”⁵⁰ Chinese immigrants were seen as spatial and temporal outsiders to the developmental narrative of the U.S. nation-state and on that basis to be excluded. Denied coevalness by the state, the detainees set about to write themselves into modes of copresence that augured alternative histories and futures of belonging.

Scenes of Rewriting

To speak of the thing-ness of writing is to understand it not as an artifact inert and complete unto itself but as something in a constant state of motion and flux, which is continually transported from one place or time to another, one genre or medium to another, one person or public to another.⁵¹

– Liu and Zeitlin

What do the Angel Island poems mean to noncontemporaries, to “later visitors”? As Zeitlin has suggested, the poems as writing *in situ* – that is, as writing “in place,” or in the situation in which it was originally formed or deposited – continue to be, after the restoration of the detention center and its subsequent designation as a National Historic Landmark, “theoretically defined by

a specific location.” However, in this case, the definition has changed and the site has been repopulated with new meanings. Pressed into ideological service alongside its more well-known East Coast counterpart, Ellis Island, as the bicoastal bookends of a developmental narrative of national incorporation, the Angel Island Immigration Station and the contemporaneity once instantiated by the wall inscriptions have had their social and temporal meanings dislodged and absorbed into another temporality, into the set of meanings attached to the passage of time that underwrites the ethico-political developmental narrative of the nation. Ironically, in order to secure the necessary federal funding to restore the Angel Island Immigration Station, those championing the restoration efforts found themselves having to recast a history of exclusionary practices in terms that would fit the procrustean narrative of national inclusiveness.⁵² The story of the immigration station had to be “reframe[d] as an American story of triumph and diversity, and not just a tragic story about Chinese exclusion and detention.”⁵³ Asserting that “Angel Island and Ellis Island serve as bookends to the national story of immigration, not only in geography, but also in meaning and experience,”⁵⁴ brings the story of the Chinese immigrants detained at the Angel Island Immigration Station to a premature close, and turns it into “a trophy in the ongoing triumph of other people’s victories.”⁵⁵

The opening lines to Tet Yee’s poem, “On Re-visiting Angel Island,” suggest a contrary impulse, an impulse to keep that story open, and to “finger the jagged grain”⁵⁶ of unfinished history.

I cannot forget my imprisonment in the wooden building.
The writing on the wall terrifies me.
Returning here after forty years,
I seek out poems now incomplete.⁵⁷

Within the context of the cultural practice of *tibishi*, the writer who encounters one of his own earlier inscriptions is given to reflecting on the disappearance of his younger self. The speaker here, however, seems less caught up with what once was than with the enduring presence of something that continues to terrify him. What is the haunting temporality that underwrites this scene of revisitation? “[P]oems now incomplete” may simply refer to poems that are no longer complete or intact because the material surfaces on which they had been inscribed have deteriorated. However, the incompleteness of the poems may also be bound up with the intention of seeking them out in the present, leaving us to ask whether the incompleteness is located in

the poems, in the speaker, or in the situation of detention in which poems and speaker are mutually implicated.

While the “narrative” of detention may have been brought to a close by its incorporation in a triumphalist narrative, the situation of detention itself may still be making claims on the present. Pointing to both a past and a future, the literal and figurative “writing on the wall” is at once testimony and portent, at once a record of the detainees’s naming and negotiation of a specific situation of detention, and a foretelling/warning about a recurring proverbial situation of unjust incarceration. Highlighting the character of the Angel Island wall inscriptions as event rather than artifact, “the writing on the wall” implicates the visitor/reader in a situational dynamic that calls for collaborative response, for ongoing co-laboring on the fields of symbolic and political action. In this light, (re)-visiting the writing left behind on Angel Island calls not for entombing the poems and the experiences that occasioned them within inert structures of anodyne memorialization but, instead, for rearticulating and reactivating these traces of the textures of social intent.

Notes

- 1 Erika Lee and Judy Yung, eds., *Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway to America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 103.
- 2 Wu Hung, “On Rubbings: Their Materiality and Historicity,” in *Writing and Materiality in China: Essays in Honor of Patrick Hanan*, ed. Judith T. Zeitlin and Lydia H. Liu (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 45.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Given the ongoing debates over nomenclature within the field of sinology, there continue to be disagreements and confusions over the use of certain terms pertaining to things “Chinese.” Some of the disagreements stem from a perceived need for greater specificity or analytical purchase, while others stem from political or ideological concerns. In this chapter, I refer to the language in which the poems were written as “Cantonese” rather than “Chinese.” There are enough significant differences (in usage, grammar, and vocabulary) between Cantonese and “standard Chinese” to warrant the distinction. When referring to the denizens of China as a whole, I use the term *Chinese*. The vast majority of the Chinese immigrants passing through the Angel Island Immigration Station were from the regions around the Pearl River delta where Cantonese, or Cantonese-inflected languages, constituted the *lingua franca*. Many sinologists today use the term *Hanyu* (the language of the dominant Han ethnic majority in China and whose language formed the basis of the current national language – referred to as standard Chinese, Mandarin, or Putonghua) to designate what has conventionally been understood as the “Chinese language.” While cognizant of the terminological and ideological implications of these respective terms, I use “Chinese language” instead of “Hanyu” here because the purposes of this discussion

are better served by invoking the more familiar term that signals a specific set of historical connotations. An account of these terminological debates can be found in Shu-Mei Shih's introduction in Shu-mei Shih, Chien-hsin Tsai, and Brian Bernards, eds., *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

- 5 Te-Hsing Shan, "Carved on the Walls: The Archaeology and Canonization of the Angel Island Chinese Poems," in *American Babel: Literatures of the United States from Abnaki to Zuni*, ed. Marc Shell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 369–70.
- 6 Steven G. Yao, *Foreign Accents: Chinese American Verse from Exclusion to Postethnicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 63–4.
- 7 See recent work by Yunte Huang, Steven G. Yao, and R. John Williams, and earlier work by Sau-ling Wong on Sinophone American immigrant literature. This body of work is noted in the bibliography.
- 8 At issue here is not just the matter of a Sinitic language but of which Sinitic language or dialect. What are the potential consequences of reading written Cantonese through the interpretive lens of written Mandarin or Hanyu? One significant difference between written Cantonese and written Mandarin is the lack of standardization when choosing a written character to represent a given Cantonese word. Donald Snow notes that "Cantonese dictionaries do not always agree as to which written form should represent any given Cantonese word. It is not uncommon for the same word to be represented with different characters in different dictionaries." See Donald Snow, *Cantonese as Written Language* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 58. Even more significantly, Snow points out that "uniformity of character use in written Cantonese" doesn't seem to be terribly important to the average writer and that a writer might well choose different characters on different occasions (or even in the same piece of writing) to represent a given word. A general consensus among Cantonese readers and writers around relying on "sound [over] precedent" (59) allows communication to proceed unimpeded. When read against the backdrop of forms of written Chinese in which such choices are standardized, the choices made by Cantonese writers might be construed primarily as mistakes – mistakes that could be seen as reflections of the educational levels, or degree of linguistic sophistication, of the writers. The pressure of scholarly and institutional imperatives concerning standardization can make for awkward, if not fraught, situations. E.g., in the "Translators' Note" in *Island*, the editors note that "the Chinese terms are transliterated in the Hanzhi Pinyin system" but that in transcribing interviews with former detainees, they have chosen to "retain the Cantonese spelling of Chinese names and terms in order to give the printed interviews a more true-to-life flavor" (31). "Hanzi" or Hanyu pinyin is a phonetic system for transcribing the Mandarin pronunciation of Chinese characters into Roman script (hence the term *romanization*). There are other romanization systems (e.g., Yale and Jyutping) designed for transcribing Cantonese pronunciations. The presence of Chinese terms rendered in Hanyu pinyin can produce a sonic overlay that mutes the sound and emphases of the original language of composition, a muting implicitly acknowledged in the editorial decision to retain Cantonese spellings of names and terms in the course of transcribing interviews with former detainees. While it's not possible to pursue it here, the sonic palimpsest generated within this situation of translation/transliteration needs to be understood – alongside the visual and tactile palimpsests under discussion – as one of the "multiple events" that together comprise the contingent objecthood of the wall inscriptions.

- 9 A helpful discussion of this issue can be found in R. John Williams, "Decolonizing Cathay: Teaching the Scandals of Translation through Angel Island Poetry," *Transformations* 17.2 (Fall 2006 / Winter 2007).
- 10 Lydia H. Liu and Judith T. Zeitlin, "Introduction," in Zeitlin and Liu, *Writing and Materiality*, 1–26.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 17.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 13 Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions, 1960), 21. Rey Chow quotes John DeFrancis on the matter of this misunderstanding of the Chinese language: "Chinese characters are a phonetic, not an ideographic, system of writing. . . . There never has been, and never can be, such a thing as an ideographic system of writing. The concept of Chinese writing as a means of conveying ideas without regard to speech took hold as part of the chinoiserie fad among Western intellectuals that was stimulated by the generally highly laudatory writings of Catholic missionaries from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries." See Chow, "How (the) Inscrutable Chinese Led to Globalized Theory," *PMLA* 116.1 (January 2001): 70.
- 14 Haun Saussy, "Impressions de Chine: Or, How to Translate from a Nonexistent Original," in *Sinographies: Writing China*, ed. Eric Hayot, Haun Saussy, and Steven G. Yao (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 65.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 *Ibid.*, 67.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 Kenneth Burke, "Literature as Equipment for Living," in Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 296–7.
- 20 Yunte Huang, *Transpacific Imaginations: History, Literature, Counterpoetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 107. Working at the intersection of U.S. literary studies and Asian studies, Yunte Huang has been instrumental in opening up a rich interpretive vein for reading the Angel Island poems through bringing to our attention the relationship between the Angel Island poems and a Chinese poetic form called "*tibishi*."
- 21 Zeitlin and Liu, *Writing and Materiality*, 76.
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 Ascertaining the fact of the Angel Island authors' familiarity with the subgenre of *tibishi* is less important to this discussion than exploring how this subgenre offers some conceptual coordinates for tracing the significance of the Angel Island inscriptions as a material, literary, or social practice.
- 24 Zeitlin and Liu, *Writing and Materiality*, 76.
- 25 Weiss further writes, the "[p]eople had carved this stuff on every square inch of wall space, not just in this one room but all over." For Chinese Studies scholar Charles Egan, the proliferation of poems suggests the activity of "a Chinese 'poetry society' that continued over time." Erika Lee and Judy Yung, *Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway to America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 302, 104.
- 26 *Island* refers to the Him Mark Lai et al. collection *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island 1910–1940*, ed. Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung (San

- Francisco: HOC DOI [History of Chinese – Detained on Island]), 1980. See poems #27 and #31 in *Island*.
- 27 Mr. Ng, interview in *Island*, 136. The poems recovered thus far constitute in fact only a small portion of the inscriptions, many of which have either faded or deteriorated, or been obscured by one or more of the immigration authorities' seven campaigns between 1910 and 1946 to purge the walls of writing. I am grateful for the extensive research (including observations about the number, location, and literary context, of the poems, as well as the history of efforts to erase the wall inscriptions) undertaken by Charles Egan, Wan Liu, Newton Liu, and Xing Chu Wang, the Poetry Consultants for the Angel Island poetry project that culminated in *Poetry and Inscriptions: Translation and Analysis*, a report prepared for the California Department of Parks and Recreation and the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation. I'd also like to thank Judy Yung for making this report available to me. *Poetry and Inscriptions: Translation and Analysis*, a report prepared for the California Department of Parks and Recreation and Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation. February 2004, 1–3.
 - 28 From *Poetry and Inscriptions: Translation and Analysis*, a report prepared for the California Department of Parks and Recreation and Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation. February 2004, 1–3.
 - 29 Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung, *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island 1910–1940* (San Francisco: HOC DOI – History of Chinese Detained on Island, 1980), 24.
 - 30 Mr. Ng, interview in *Island*, 136.
 - 31 Steven G. Yao's chapter on Angel Island poetry in *Foreign Accents: Chinese American Verse from Exclusion to Postethnicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) offers an extensive critical discussion of these poetic collaborations, including linking them to other literary and cultural practices including forms of call-and-response and jazz improvisation in the African American tradition.
 - 32 Liu and Zeitlin, "Introduction," 10. Because we might expect that forms would function differently in different settings, determining whether or not the Angel Island writers drew directly on this tradition is less pertinent here than exploring how the form actually works in the context of detention on Angel Island.
 - 33 Poem #34 in *Island*, 84–5.
 - 34 Poem #59 in *Island*, 124–5.
 - 35 Doran Larson, "Toward a Prison Poetics," *College Literature* 37.3 (Summer 2010): 146.
 - 36 Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form*, 300.
 - 37 *Ibid.*, 294.
 - 38 *Ibid.*, 293, 296.
 - 39 *Ibid.*, 298.
 - 40 *Island*, 19.
 - 41 *Ibid.*
 - 42 *Ibid.*, 22.
 - 43 Liu and Zeitlin, "Introduction," 16.
 - 44 Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Volume 3*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 111.
 - 45 *Ibid.*

- 46 Zeitlin underscores this point about the specific temporality of *tibishi* with a comparison between urban graffiti today and *tibishi*: “[W]hereas graffiti tend to evoke a sense of immediacy, the present, forced confrontation, *tibishi* tend to elicit a melancholy response of pastness and loss.” Zeitlin and Liu, *Writing and Materiality*, 79.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 77.
- 48 To date, no records of poems in the women’s quarters have been found. The women’s quarters were located in the administration building, which burned down in 1940. However, former female detainees have indicated in interviews that they had seen poems inscribed on the walls. See *Island*, 25.
- 49 Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Constructs Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983; repr. 2002), 143.
- 50 Mark Pittenger, *American Socialists and Evolutionary Thought, 1870–1920* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 172, 174.
- 51 Zeitlin and Liu, *Writing and Materiality*, 1.
- 52 See Lee and Yung, *Angel Island*, 310.
- 53 *Ibid.*
- 54 Katherine Toy, cited in Lee and Yung, *Angel Island*, 310.
- 55 David Kaufmann, “Thanks for the Memory: Bloch, Benjamin, and the Philosophy of History,” in *Not Yet: Reconsidering Ernst Bloch*, ed. Jamie Owen Daniel and Tom Moylan (London: Verso Press, 1997), 45.
- 56 Ralph Ellison, “Richard Wright’s Blues,” in Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (Toronto: New American Library of Canada Limited, 1966), 90.
- 57 Lee and Yung, *Angel Island*, 108. Tet Yee was detained on Angel Island for six months in 1932. During his time there, he managed to copy down ninety-six of the wall inscriptions. See chapter 2 of Lee and Yung, *Angel Island* for a discussion of the various versions of the Angel Island poems and the history of their public circulation.

The Eaton Sisters and the Figure of the Eurasian

EMMA JINHUA TENG

In 1878, a delegate to California's Constitutional Convention called for action on the "expanding evil" of Chinese immigration, declaring the Chinese "unfit for assimilation with people of our race. . . . Were the Chinese to amalgamate at all with our people . . . the result of the amalgamation would be a hybrid of the most despicable, a mongrel of the most detestable that has ever afflicted the earth."¹ Such was the world in the years when the Eaton sisters, now celebrated pioneers of Asian American literature, came of age. Born to a Chinese mother and an English father, they were raised in North America during an era when anti-Chinese sentiment was on the rise, and the fear of miscegenation was frequently harnessed in service of nativism. The "half-caste" was held in disrepute, and notions of hybrid degeneracy were widely propagated by racial theorists, politicians, and the press.² Through writing, four Eaton sisters – Edith, Grace, Sara, and Winnifred – would contest the prejudices and social injustices they saw around them, each in her own way leaving a lasting mark on the history of American letters.

The most famous of the sisters, Edith and Winnifred, are today recognized as foundational figures in Asian American literature. Edith (1865–1914), or Sui Sin Far as she is better known, is hailed as the "first Asian American fiction writer," while Winnifred (1875–1954), who took the pen name Onoto Watanna, is acknowledged as the "first Asian American novelist." Winnifred is furthermore credited along with Sara (1868–1940) with publishing the first Asian American cookbook.³ Less well known is the writing career of Grace (1867–1957), who gave up her early literary aspirations for law, becoming the first woman of Asian descent to enter the American bar.⁴ Grace nonetheless maintained her interest in writing, working as a legal reporter and columnist, and she authored an article that is the first published biographical history of women lawyers in the United States.⁵ Taken together, the achievements of the four Eaton sisters in diverse aspects of American letters are impressive indeed.

Yet their status as “Asian American pioneers” cannot be taken for granted, for the sisters were Eurasian, and their lived experiences distinct from those of other Asian immigrants of their time.⁶ Treating the Eaton sisters as “a part [of], yet apart [from]”⁷ the field of Asian American literature, this chapter pays special attention to their articulation of a distinct Eurasian voice in their texts, focusing on the works of Edith and Winnifred, who were among the earliest Eurasian writers in North America to publish on the subject of East-West interracialism.⁸ Through writing they grappled with the meanings of being “half-caste” and contested the dominant discourse of hybrid degeneracy – a project to which Sara contributed as a collaborator with Winnifred. Class and gender issues also feature in the works of the Eaton sisters, and hence while this chapter focuses on the figure of the Eurasian I am attentive to the need to read their texts through what Shirley Geok-lin Lim calls the “hybridity matrix” of race, class, and gender.⁹ On these last two issues, Winnifred and Grace made especially strong contributions: Winnifred condemning the professional and sexual exploitation of young working women and Grace with biographies of pioneering women lawyers and eloquent appeals for women’s rights. Thus, the place of the Eaton sisters in the history of North American letters, and their legacy for the struggle for equity and inclusion, are best appreciated from the multiple vantage points of Asian American studies, mixed-race studies, and women’s studies.

An Unconventional Family

The Eaton sisters were the daughters of Edward and Grace Eaton, born in an era when East-West intermarriage was rare. Originally from the English town of Macclesfield, Edward Eaton (1839–1915) had traveled to China in the early 1860s to work in the silk trade. There he met Grace Trefusis (1846–1922), a Chinese missionary woman who had been adopted as a child and educated in England. The two fell in love and were married on November 7, 1863 by the British consul in Shanghai. After the birth of a son in 1864, they returned to Macclesfield, where Edith was born the following year. The Eatons then set off to seek their fortune in America, where Grace and Sara were born, before a business failure forced them to return to England. A few years later, they migrated to Montréal, Canada, where Winnifred, the eighth of fourteen children, was born.¹⁰

The Eaton children were raised in a culturally European household, learning little of Chinese culture. Yet they found themselves facing the intense Sinophobia that was sweeping North America. Edith, Winnifred, and Sara

would later chronicle the Eaton family's experiences with anti-Chinese sentiment and the prejudice against "half-castes" that they encountered. Financial hardship also shaped the sisters' lives. Edith was forced to go out to work early, doing stenography while trying her hand at journalism, taking the "local Chinese reporting" for Montréal newspapers. Her big break came in 1896 when her brother-in-law, editor Walter Blackburn Harte (who married sister Grace), published three of her stories in the American magazines *Fly Leaf* and *Lotus*. These were the first of Edith's "Chinese stories," and they were signed with the pen name "Sui Seen Far," Chinese for "Narcissus." (Edith would eventually spell this "Sui Sin Far.") Attempting to establish her literary career, Edith moved between Jamaica, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Seattle, and Boston. The only Eaton child to acknowledge her Chinese heritage openly, Edith used her position as a journalist to protest discrimination against the Chinese. She further created sympathetic Chinese characters in her fiction, defying the negative stereotypes of the era. Edith published pieces in popular periodicals such as *Good Housekeeping*, *New England Magazine*, *The Land of Sunshine*, *The Overland Monthly*, and the *Independent*. In 1912, she published a book of collected short stories, *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, brought out by AC McClurg of Chicago. Preferring independence to marriage, Edith supported herself until her untimely death in 1914.

Grace was the next in line, and she also took up journalism while working as a secretary at a Montréal law firm. In 1891, she married Walter Blackburn Harte (1867–99), a struggling writer who was appointed assistant editor of the *New England Magazine* in Boston. Grace moved with her husband to Boston, and then New York, helping him with his literary work. Grace also wrote her own articles, which would appear in newspapers such as the *Boston Globe*, *New York World*, and the *Detroit Free Press*.¹¹ After Walter's death in 1899, Grace took her son to live in Chicago where she studied law. Admitted to the Illinois Bar in 1912, Grace established a practice in 1915, specializing in real estate law. Dedicated to social justice, Grace became a champion of tenants' rights and women's rights. She was active in the Women's Bar Association of Illinois, and served as vice president for several terms. In 1940, Grace drafted an early version of an equal rights amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Maintaining her early interest in writing, Grace became a columnist for the *Chicago Daily Law Bulletin* in 1937, and a reporter and columnist for the national *Women Lawyers' Journal* in 1939. As a writer, Grace's greatest achievements were in the realm of feminism. In 1941, she joined a project spearheaded by Mary Earhart Dillon to produce a comprehensive history of American women's achievements. She drafted a piece on "Women and the Legal Profession," which included short

biographies of the first ninety American women lawyers.¹² Although the project was never completed, Grace published an abridged version of this work in the *Women Lawyers' Journal* in 1947. "The Battle for the Right of Women to Practice Law" was the first history of female lawyers in the United States and also an eloquent manifesto for women's equality.¹³ A woman of tremendous vitality, Grace continued to practice law until weeks before her death in February 1957.

Winnifred soon came to share her older sisters' literary ambitions, and by age sixteen she published her first story in a Québec newspaper. Like Edith, Winnifred worked as a reporter and then a secretary while launching her literary career, living over the years in Jamaica, Boston, Richmond, Cincinnati, Chicago, New York, Nevada, Alberta, Calgary, and Hollywood, and she similarly benefited from her connections with Walter Blackburn Harte. Unlike Edith, however, Winnifred did not adopt a Chinese pen name. Rather, she took on a pseudo-Japanese pen name, Onoto Watanna, capitalizing on the American public fascination with Japan and the market for "Madame Butterfly"-style Orientalist romances.¹⁴ Publicity photographs for her novels portrayed Winnifred dressed in kimono and posed against Orientalist backdrops. Whereas Edith found her niche as a writer of "Chinese stories," Winnifred established herself as an "expert" on Japanese culture and was regularly featured in women's magazines and other periodicals. Her assumption of a Japanese persona thus proved a successful marketing ploy. Ultimately, it was Winnifred who became the more successful author, a popular and prolific romance novelist and Hollywood screenwriter with hundreds of magazine articles and short stories, fifteen novels, a memoir, a cookbook, scores of scenarios and screenplays, and other works to her name. Married twice, once to a wealthy Calgary oilman, Winnifred had four children and lived a long and drama-filled life until 1954.¹⁵

In contrast to her literary sisters, Sara chose a different path, becoming an artist's model and a painter, and marrying German artist Karl Bosse. She moved to Boston, and later New York, and published a series of articles on Chinese cookery in *Harper's Bazaar* and the *Ladies' Home Journal* between January and October 1913. Featuring recipes, as well as tips for decorating and entertaining in an Oriental style, these magazine articles were reworked for the *Chinese-Japanese Cookbook* published by Sara Bosse and Onoto Watanna in 1914.¹⁶ Brought out by Chicago publisher Rand McNally, this was one of the earliest Asian cookbooks published in the United States. The two sisters also collaborated on a novel, *Marion: The Story of an Artist's Model* (1916), which was the story of Sara's life as told to Winnifred.¹⁷ Sara's achievements as an artist

and culinary writer have yet to be fully documented and await future research by scholars in the field.¹⁸

Hence, even as the Eaton children were profoundly affected by anti-Chinese racism growing up (leading several siblings to hide their Chinese ancestry in their adult lives), the early-twentieth-century rage for Orientalism provided three sisters with a ready market for publishing. How to navigate the perils of this highly fraught context, in which the avid consumption of Orientalism coexisted alongside fierce anti-Chinese sentiment, proved a challenge they faced all their lives, and, as suggested by the names under which they published, each adopted a radically different strategy for negotiating their public identities.

What's in a Name?

Debates over the fascinating ways in which Edith and Winnifred complicate questions of identity emerged as one of the liveliest areas in Asian American literary studies during the 1990s and 2000s.¹⁹ Although Edith was less commercially successful than Winnifred, she was the first to be rescued from obscurity by activists who canonized her work in the pioneering Asian American literary anthology, *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Literature* (1974). Her fame would grow in the 1980s with the publication of critical work proclaiming Sui Sin Far the “First Chinese-American Fictionist” and a “Pioneer Chinamerican.”²⁰ As scholars turned their attention to Winnifred, many were troubled by her Japanese ruse, and comparisons of the two sisters generally embraced Edith as the “good sister” who courageously acknowledged her Chinese ancestry and championed “her people,” while denouncing Winnifred as the “bad sister” who sold out with a “fake” Japanese identity, perpetuating Orientalist stereotypes in blind pursuit of commercial success.²¹

By the 1990s, critics had begun to challenge this simple dichotomy, with some arguing that Winnifred was in fact a “trickster” author who worked indirectly to subvert racism through fictional characters who were strong and defiant underneath their Orientalist veneer.²² Many of her tragic romances were also sharply critical of the cavalier way that Western men treated Asian women as playthings, performing a feminist critique even as they reinforced Orientalist stereotypes.²³ If we consider Onoto Watanna’s nonfiction works, we find protests against discrimination in works such as “The Japanese in America,” published in the *Eclectic Magazine* in 1907. Decrying the widespread racism of her era, Winnifred asserted that to “speak of the Oriental nations as inferior is to make an ignorant and stupid statement.”²⁴ Appealing to “the

fair-minded, right-thinking Americans for ordinary justice,” Winnifred closed the article with a statement of her own Eurasian identity, claiming to be “Chinese as well as Japanese,” Irish as well as English.²⁵ Hence, Winnifred contributed in her own way to the antiracist work taken up by her sister, all the while engaging more explicitly with feminist critiques.

In the only book-length comparison of the two sisters, Dominika Ferens (2002) further challenged the “good sister/bad sister” dichotomy by arguing that Edith, just as much as Winnifred, constructed her persona along with her pen name, and that neither sister in fact had unmediated access to the Asian cultures that they claimed to represent. The problematic nature of labeling one sister “authentically” Chinese American, and the other a “phony” Japanese American, is indeed further underscored when we consider their avowedly mixed Eurasian identities. Bringing Sara and Grace into the picture allows us to consider the broader range of options navigated by Eurasians in constructing their public identities, and to understand the sisters’ choices in terms of a flexible continuum, rather than a rigid choice between “real” and “fake.”

In sharp contrast to her sisters’ Oriental pen names, Sara pursued another strategy altogether, publishing her Chinese culinary writings under her married name, Sara Bosse, and constructing an authorial persona that emphasized her Europeaness. Sara walked a fine line, for while she never claimed the insider knowledge of a “native speaker,” she did claim other types of insider knowledge to market herself as an expert on Chinese cuisine, decor, and dining customs, and one of her *Harper’s Bazaar* articles featured a fanciful photograph of Sara dressed in a kimono.²⁶ Asserting the authenticity of her recipes, Sara advertised her Chinese connections and her access to culinary secrets that were typically impossible for the “foreign devil” to pry out of “inscrutable” Chinese cooks. She claimed, for example, that her “genuine” recipes had been given her “as a special expression of respect by a near relative of [a] famous family of Chinese cooks.”²⁷ At once affirming her European identity and her authority on “things Chinese,” her articles closed with an invitation for readers to contact “Mrs. Bosse” with questions or for names of reliable Chinese firms.²⁸ It may be tempting to write off her works as Orientalist commercialism that reinforced traditional notions of female domesticity, and yet, given that the restaurant industry was one of the few economic niches available to Chinese immigrants in the early twentieth century, Sara’s efforts to promote public interest in Chinese cuisine should not be so quickly dismissed. Sara enjoined readers to eat at Chinese restaurants before attempting home cooking *à la chinoise*, and to purchase tea ware and other decorative items

at Chinese shops. By emphasizing the refined and artistic nature of Chinese culture, and endorsing the cuisine of a people once disparaged as “rat-eaters,” Sara played a role in combating anti-Chinese sentiment, albeit by appealing to a class-based romantic Orientalism. As one of the earliest women of Asian descent to enter the field of culinary writing, Sara paved the way for others like Grace Zia Chu and Joyce Chen.

Grace similarly chose to publish under her married name, and in her case Orientalism was but a side note. Reporting on the “social aspects” of the annual convention of the National Association of Women Lawyers in 1939, Grace described the Javanese and Chinese entertainments in flowery prose reminiscent of her sisters’ Orientalist texts. She reported on these events with an outsider’s detachment like Sara, never hinting at her own Eurasian background, but yet used the opportunity to refute negative stereotypes of the Chinese, praising their “grace and charm” and countering the racist notion that the Chinese were “soulless.”²⁹ Finally, she praised the high intelligence of the banquet speaker, Princess Der Ling, as a worthy representative of China.

In rejecting the “good sister/bad sister” binary, some critics have argued that the very terms in which Edith and Winnifred have been judged as writers – moral and ethical terms – are misguided, questioning the privileging of “narratives of resistance against Anglo-American assimilation” within U.S. ethnic literary criticism.³⁰ The blossoming of scholarship on the Eaton sisters has thus been enormously productive in critically interrogating concepts such as ethnic authenticity, ethnographic authority, and literary voice, and in promoting intersectional analyses of race, gender, and class, and has therefore played a central role in the ongoing development of Asian American literary studies.

The Figure of the Eurasian

One significant turn in the critical literature on the Eaton sisters has been inspired by the growing influence of mixed-race studies since the 1990s. In the rush to reclaim Sui Sin Far as a pioneering “Chinese American” author, many early critics overlooked the fact that Edith never labeled herself “Chinese American,” but rather “Eurasian,” asserting her mixedness and her difference from both Europeans and Chinese. Recent scholarship, however, has analyzed her work (and Winnifred’s) in terms of critical concepts such as hybridity, border-crossing, and liminality.³¹ It is now possible to speak of the sisters not simply as “Asian American,” but as “Eurasian.” In the final section of this chapter, I examine the figure of the Eurasian in select writings by Edith and

Winnifred, showing how their works were shaped by – but also transcended – the tragic mulatto formula that dominated American interracial literature of their era.

Several of Edith's earliest published writings dealt with the subject of Euro-Asian interracialism, including two articles she published in the *Montréal Daily Star* in 1895, and two short stories, "Sweet Sin" and "The Singsong Woman," that both appeared in the Los Angeles magazine *The Land of Sunshine* in 1898. She would go on to publish several other noteworthy short stories featuring Eurasian protagonists in addition to two brief life narratives that relate her experiences as a Eurasian. At the time of her death, Edith was working on a book on "the half Chinese," but the manuscript appears to have been lost.³²

Building on reader interest in the controversial subject of interracialism, Edith nonetheless departed from the predominant American discourses of her time, challenging stereotypical representations of miscegenation as a moral outrage and of the "half-caste" as physically, intellectually and morally degenerate. Her fictional treatment of romance and intermarriage between white women and Chinese men, for example, contrasts sharply with the sensationalized "miscegenation dramas" that became popular in American newspapers from the 1880s on.³³ Whereas miscegenation dramas portrayed interracial liaisons as a danger for white women, her stories showed a very different picture of relations between white women and Chinese men, and emphasized the kind and gentle natures of the latter. Similarly, instead of portraying the "half-caste" as a threat to American society, she turned the tables to focus on the sufferings endured by Eurasians in a racist world. She further defied prevailing theories of hybrid degeneracy through her portraits of Eurasians in both reportage and fiction. Perhaps most poignantly, her two short life narratives, published successively in the *Independent* in 1909 and 1911, relate the prejudice she encountered among both whites and Chinese, and the enormous societal pressure for Chinese Eurasians to pass.

Winnifred also began her career with several noteworthy pieces on interracialism, including the nonfiction article "The Half Caste" (1898), the short story "A Half Caste" (1899), and her first romance novel *Miss Nume of Japan: A Japanese-American Romance* (1899). She continued publishing on this topic for years. Winnifred generally chose to write about Japanese Eurasians, either those living in Japan or born in Japan and traveling abroad. The sociopolitical contexts that the two sisters address are thus quite different: Edith placed the Chinese Eurasian within the context of Chinese immigration to North America, and most of her stories are set in Chinatown; Winnifred generally

placed the Japanese Eurasian in the more exotic context of European and American commercial and missionary adventures in Japan. Hence, whereas Edith used the figure of the Eurasian as a means to address the so-called Chinese Question, Winnifred's portraits of "half-castes" capitalized on what she scathingly called the "interest, strongly mixed perhaps with pity" aroused by the publication of John Luther Long's popular *Madame Butterfly* in 1895, a tragic romance that ends with the recuperation of the "half-breed" child for the American family.³⁴ Following the "Madame Butterfly" model, Winnifred focused her attention on the nonmarital children born of temporary love affairs and often abandoned by their fathers. However, Winnifred also diverged from this formula, creating several Eurasian characters born from the marriages of English or American women to Japanese noblemen. In addition, her nonfiction works address the marriages of Japanese immigrants to white women in the United States, and like Edith, she broke away from the miscegenation drama formula. Interestingly, although Winnifred created numerous fictional Eurasian characters, her autobiographical *Me: A Book of Remembrance* (1915), makes only a vague reference to the "foreignness" of her mother and does not explicitly address her Eurasian identity.

Nonetheless, both Edith and Winnifred produced early works that could be considered apologia for the Eurasian. Edith's "Half-Chinese Children: Those of American Mothers and Chinese Fathers, Some of Their Troubles and Discomforts," which appeared in the *Montréal Daily Star* in 1895, reported on the sad plight of "half-Chinese children" in the Boston and New York Chinatowns. A measured defense of Eurasians, the article refuted the notion that their troubles derived from the biological consequences of race mixing, blaming instead the detrimental effects of prejudice and environment. It further countered notions of hybrid degeneracy by asserting the quick intelligence and physical beauty of these children. The article attempted to generate reader sympathy by taking the perspective of half-Chinese children who were subjected to racist taunts from white children and were yet looked down upon by the Chinese for "being neither one thing nor the other."³⁵

Winnifred's "The Half Caste," published in the Chicago *Conkey's Home Journal* in 1898, presents a pseudoethnographic account of the "half-breed" offspring of Japanese mothers and "Caucasian" fathers living in Japan. The article represented the biracial subject in terms of the familiar "neither/nor" trope, and like Edith, Winnifred emphasized the racism Eurasians faced from both sides. In contrast to her sister, however, Winnifred extensively indulged pseudoanthropological constructions of the "half-breed Japanese" as a racial type, issuing blanket statements concerning their "physical constitutions"

and “dispositions.” She furthermore reaffirmed British colonial stereotypes of “half-castes” as hypersensitive and moody, unstable and dissipated. Yet, Winnifred also balanced the notion of hybrid degeneracy with the notion of mixedness as a source of creativity, and she championed the Eurasian in stronger terms than Edith ever did. Winnifred not only refuted, one by one, numerous negative stereotypes about Eurasians, but she also asserted their superiority in certain respects. Urging readers to get to know the genuine “half-breed” beneath the hard exterior shell, Winnifred promised they would find “the brightest and best of gold.”³⁶

Both Edith and Winnifred wrote poignantly of the ways in which Eurasians were made “to feel different,” singled out as racial curiosities. They were equally critical of both overt racism and of “petting,” which they perceived as patronizing and condescending. In several of her works, Edith spoke out against the ways in which the Eaton children were subjected to inspection and scrutiny, much as people “gaze upon strange animals in a menagerie.”³⁷ Her autobiographical “Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian,” is punctuated by scene after scene in which the Eurasian child is “inspected,” “surveyed,” “scanned from head to foot,” or subjected to a curious stare. Such experiences were also echoed in her sister Sara’s story, *Marion: The Story of an Artist’s Model* (1916). The novel opens with a scene of young Marion at a grocery, where she is subjected to gossip about her mother’s nationality and placed under the curious gaze of the grocer and a stranger.³⁸ Winnifred’s autobiographical *Me*, which like *Marion* provides only a hint of the mother’s “foreign” nationality, similarly underscored the narrator’s “foreign-looking” difference and the sexualized attention it continually aroused. The confluence of these memories suggests that the experience of being treated as a racial curiosity was a common feature of the sisters’ lives.

As a justification for the Eurasian, there is perhaps no more famous work than Edith’s “Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian,” a short autobiographical work first published in the *Independent* in 1909 and now widely anthologized. This “lifelet” was followed two years later by “The Persecution and Oppression of Me” (also in the *Independent*), which Dominika Ferens has convincingly attributed to Eaton.³⁹ Both short life narratives present vignettes from Edith’s life, and describe the burden of racial prejudice from both sides. Passing, which Edith represents as an unfortunate response to white racism, is a central theme of both pieces. Although Edith ultimately condemned passing as a cowardly act, she pointedly wrote: “are not those who compel them to thus cringe more to be blamed than they?”⁴⁰ Thus, Edith was unsparing in her sharp criticism of racial prejudice.

Difference from both sides, the dilemma of liminality, became a central theme of the Eaton sisters' interracial works, and, whereas Edith's Chinese stories and Winnifred's Japanese stories drew on the conventions of Orientalism, their use of the "neither/nor" trope in their Eurasian stories derives from the conventions of so-called mulatto fiction and the figure of the "tragic mulatto." With early connections to abolitionist literature, the tragic mulatto was a black-white mixed-race character doomed to unhappiness, conflict, and a tragic end because of his or her ambiguous racial status. As Werner Sollors argues, this figure was often gendered, with the male Tragic Mulatto a young rebel denouncing the old racial order, and the female Tragic Mulatta: "often a woman who . . . is yet unable to give herself in marriage . . . and is thus sad, melancholy, resigned, self-sacrificing, or suicidal."⁴¹

This marriage dilemma provided the plot line for three of Edith's Eurasian stories: "Sweet Sin," "The Singsong Woman," and "Its Wavering Image." The stories are not only critical of racial prejudice, but also of marriage as an institution that demanded the subordination of women's independent selfhood. In the first, Sweet Sin is in love with an American, Dick Farrell, and is horrified to learn that her widowed Chinese father plans to take her to China to find a suitable husband. On the eve of their departure, Sweet Sin commits suicide, leaving behind this note:

"Father, I cannot marry a Chinaman, as you wish, because my heart belongs to an American . . . though I cannot marry a Chinaman, who would despise me for being an American, yet I will not marry an American, for the Americans have made me feel so that I will save the children of the man I love from being called "Chinese! Chinese!" Farewell, father. I hope God will forgive me for being what He made me."⁴²

In contrast, "The Singsong Woman" subverts the tragic mulatto formula. This story reworks the plot of a Eurasian woman engaged by her Chinese father to marry a Chinese man. The Eurasian character, the "half-white girl" Mag-gee is fully white-identified, denying absolutely her "Chineseness" and declaring that she would rather die than marry a Chinese. Instead of ending in tragedy, however, this tale ends on a comic note, thanks to the trickster Lae Choo, who devises a ruse that enables Mag-gee to elope with her American lover.

A final reworking of this plot line comes in Eaton's mature story "Its Wavering Image." The protagonist, Pan, lives in Chinatown with her widowed Chinese father, and rarely has contact with Euro-Americans. Yet, she falls in love with a reporter, Mark Carson, who presses Pan to choose between racialized "sides" of her identity. Pan initially refuses to answer this demand, but

her hand is forced when Mark betrays her trust and reveals various Chinatown “secrets” in his paper. This time, the heroine chooses to reassert her Chinese identity, rejecting whiteness as embodied by this untrustworthy man. Pan finds inner peace in escaping the liminal condition of biracial identity, though the “wavering image” of the story’s title reminds us that such a simple resolution is illusory.

The trope of “warring blood,” another standard element of “mulatto fiction,” also appears in Edith’s work. The Tragic Mulatto is frequently depicted not only as a victim of a racist society but also of the conflict of “warring blood” which pitted racialized characteristics such as “intelligence” against “instinct.” This trope appears in Edith’s short story “Sweet Sin” as well as in “Leaves,” where the Eurasian’s “Chinese half” is characterized as passive or “good and patient,” and the “American half” or “white blood in [her] veins” as valiant and willing to fight on behalf of the victimized “Chinese half.”⁴³

Winnifred shared Edith’s early tendency to employ the conventions of so-called mulatto fiction. Although she similarly made use of the marriage dilemma as a plot device, Winnifred drew broadly on the archetypal themes and melodramatic plot lines from this genre: the search for the [white] father; kinship disrupted and restored; the longing for the white lover; passing; incest; and revenge. As in Edith’s short fiction, the Tragic Mulatto type figures the “half-caste’s” marginality. Yet Winnifred also made clever use of plot twists and parody in many of her Eurasian stories, effectively turning established stereotypes on their head, or highlighting Western hypocrisy.

Indeed, Winnifred often used her “Japanese” stories to hold a mirror to Western society, exposing the injustices of prejudice and ethnocentrism. Much as abolitionist writers used biracial characters to drive home the evils of slavery to white audiences, Onoto Watanna used the “half-white” Japanese character to expose the fundamental immorality of discrimination – implicitly taking to task both American and Japanese racists. In both cases, the partially white character provides the mainstream American audience with a point of identification, while prompting readers to consider the moral issues at stake.

This rhetorical strategy is apparent in both “The Half-Caste,” as well as the short story “The Story of Ido,” which was published in *Conkey’s Home Journal* in 1899. A typical Tragic Mulatto character, Japanese-British Ido remains a stranger to all in his village, mocked for his “strange” fair hair and blue eyes. Ostracized, Ido longs to go across the seas to “his father’s people,” where he imagines he will find acceptance. In fact, when Ido first finds himself among the English, the people to whom he imagined “he belonged,” he is shocked

to find himself even “more different.”⁴⁴ Is Ido doomed again to be a “neither/nor”? Ido’s English grandparents eventually claim him as “our boy’s son,” with “our boy’s own eyes.”⁴⁵ The eyes that had once made Ido outcast now serve as a racial sign that enables his recuperation by his British family.

This is a Tragic Mulatto story with a happy ending, where the “half-caste” finally has a “home.” The story underscores a controversial issue that was at the heart of both British colonial and American miscegenation fiction – the responsibility of the white father, or his family, toward his “mixed-race” (and often illegitimate) progeny. If miscegenation was a stain upon the family reputation, honor and Christian ethics also demanded that the family “do the right thing” by these children. “Blood” is understood not only as “race,” but also as kinship.

A father’s desire for atonement drives Winnifred’s next interracial story, “A Half Caste” (1899). Here, the search for the father is replaced by the search for the abandoned child, and although the ghastly ending of the story conforms to the Tragic Mulatto formula, the Eurasian heroine is a far cry from the melancholy, pathetic figure of Ido: she is feisty, defiant, and frank. The plot revolves around Norman Hilton’s journey to Japan to find the half-Japanese daughter he had abandoned many years ago. Falling into his old habits of womanizing, Hilton is smitten by a dancer with unusually white skin and large eyes. Kiku is not the stereotypical submissive Japanese woman, but her open contempt for the American man only fans the flames of his desire. In true melodramatic fashion, Kiku finally reveals to a horror-struck Hilton that she is his daughter, confessing that she sought to make him suffer to avenge her dead mother. Winnifred effectively intertwines the incest and miscegenation taboos in this story, condemning Western men’s treatment of Asian women as sexual toys, easily abandoned according to their whims.

Although both Edith and Winnifred frequently represented the Eurasian as “betwixt and between,” the two sisters also turned this vice into a virtue, refiguring the “alien on both soils” as a “world citizen” who transcends narrow nationalism. Embodying the amalgamation of two races, the joining of two civilizations, the figure of the Eurasian becomes a harbinger of international peace, a critic of “selfish” patriotism, and a “connecting link” between Orient and Occident. As Edith wrote in “Leaves” (1909): “Only when the whole world becomes as one family will human beings be able to see clearly and hear distinctly. I believe that some day a great part of the world will be Eurasian. I cheer myself with the thought that I am a pioneer.”⁴⁶ Similarly, Winnifred wrote: “Sometimes I dream of the day when all of us will be world citizens – not citizens merely of petty portions of the earth, showing our teeth at each

other, snarling, sneering, biting.”⁴⁷ Edith and Winnifred thus represented the Eurasian as a symbol of the future, a pioneer who must suffer the racism and animosity of a dark age, but who shows the way toward a brighter future of inclusive community. They thus ultimately refused the racist logic of the tragic mulatto formula and its unremitting emphasis on the pathological nature of mixed race.

Remarkable for their age, pioneering women of mixed heritage in a society obsessed with the color line, the Eaton sisters continue to inspire readers and scholars long after their death. Indeed, the full impact of their work and lives – and those of their other siblings – has yet to be fully documented, providing a rich ground of exploration for future scholarship. Grace and Sara may never be accorded the canonical status of Edith and Winnifred within Asian American literature, but taken as a body of writing the works of the four Eaton sisters together cover a broad spectrum of race, gender, and class concerns, and constitute a powerful legacy of writing for social justice.

Notes

- 1 E. B. Wills and P. K. Stockton (official stenographers), *Debates and Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of the State of California, Convened at the City of Sacramento, Saturday, September 28, 1878* (Sacramento, CA: State Printing, 1880–1), 632.
- 2 See Emma J. Teng, *Eurasian: Mixed Identities in the United States, China, and Hong Kong, 1842–1943* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).
- 3 See, e.g., Seiwoong Oh, *Encyclopedia of Asian-American Literature* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009), 68, 73.
- 4 Grace H. Harte, “Grace H. Harte: Member of the Illinois Bar and One of Our Associate Editors,” *Women Lawyers’ Journal* 26 (1939–40): 74.
- 5 James Doyle, “Law, Legislation and Literature: The Life of Grace H. Harte,” *Biography* 17.4 (1994): 367–5, 381. Further references in parentheses in the text.
- 6 For more on this subject, see Teng, *Eurasian*, 2013.
- 7 This is a reference to the title of Lavina Dhingra Shankar and Rajini Srikanth, eds., *A Part, Yet Apart: South Asians in Asian America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).
- 8 For more on this subject, see Teng, *Eurasian*.
- 9 See Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “Sibling Hybridities: The Case of Edith Eaton/Sui Sin Far and Winnifred Eaton/Onoto Watanna,” *Life Writing* 4.1 (2007): 81–99.
- 10 See Annette White-Parks, *Sui Sin Far/Edith Maude Eaton: A Literary Biography* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995) and Diana Birchall, *Onoto Watanna: The Story of Winnifred Eaton* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001). Further references to both in parentheses in the text.
- 11 Doyle, “Law, Legislation and Literature,” 367–85.
- 12 Grace H. Harte, “Women and the Legal Profession,” in *Series III of the Mary Earhart Dillon Collection, 1890–1945* (Cambridge, MA: Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute Harvard University, 1942), 33.

- 13 Grace H. Harte, "The Battle for the Right of Women to Practice Law," *Women Lawyers' Journal* 33 (1947): 141–53.
- 14 In *Madame Butterfly*, an American naval officer visiting Japan enters into a marriage of convenience with a young Japanese woman, whom he subsequently abandons. He returns to Japan many years later with his new American wife to claim the child of this earlier alliance. After surrendering the child, the Japanese heroine tragically commits suicide.
- 15 Dominika Ferens, *Edith and Winnifred Eaton: Chinatown Missions and Japanese Romances* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002). Further references in parentheses in the text.
- 16 Sara Bosse and Onoto Watanna, *Chinese-Japanese Cookbook* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1914). Online resource: <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:RAD.SCHL:928314>.
- 17 Onoto Watanna, Sara Bosse, and Henry Hutt, *Marion: The Story of an Artist's Model* (New York: W. J. Watt and Company, 1916).
- 18 Jean Lee Cole, *The Literary Voices of Winnifred Eaton: Redefining Ethnicity and Authenticity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002); White-Parks, *Sui Sin Far*; Birchall, *Onoto Watanna*.
- 19 Paul Spickard, "The Subject Is Mixed Race: The Boom in Biracial Biography," in *Rethinking "Mixed Race,"* ed. David Parker and Miri Song (London: Pluto Press, 2001), 88.
- 20 S.E. Solberg, "Sui Sin Far/Edith Eaton: The First Chinese American Fictionist," *MELUS* 8.1 (1981): 27–39 and Amy Ling, "Edith Eaton: Pioneer Chinamerican Writer and Feminist," *American Literary Realism* 16 (Autumn 1983): 287–98.
- 21 See, e.g., Xiao-Huang Yin, "Between East and West: Sui Sin Far – The First Chinese American Writer," *Arizona Quarterly* 47 (1991): 49–84, 54. See also Viet Nguyen, *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Ferens, *Edith and Winnifred Eaton*; and Linda Trinh Moser, "Introduction," in Onoto Watanna *"A Half Caste" and Other Writings*, ed. Linda Trinh Moser and Elizabeth Rooney (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), xi–xxiii, for discussion of this dichotomy in criticism.
- 22 See, e.g., Yuko Matsukawa, "Cross-Dressing and Cross-Naming: Decoding Onoto Watanna," in *Tricksterism in Turn-of-the-Century American Literature: A Multicultural Perspective*, ed. Elizabeth Ammons and Annette White-Parks (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994), 106–25.
- 23 See Amy Ling, "Winnifred Eaton: Ethnic Chameleon and Popular Success," *MELUS* 2.3 (Fall 1984): 5–15; Ling, *Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry* (New York: Pergamon, 1990); Ferens, *Edith and Winnifred Eaton*; Moser, "Introduction," in Watanna, *"A Half Caste,"* xi–xxiii.
- 24 "The Japanese in America," published in *Eclectic Magazine*, February 1907, in Watanna, *"A Half Caste,"* 175.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 173.
- 26 Sara Bosse, "Giving a Chinese Luncheon Party," *Harper's Bazaar* (March 1913): 135, 146.
- 27 Bosse, *Chinese-Japanese Cookbook*, 5.
- 28 Bosse, "Giving a Chinese Luncheon Party," 146.
- 29 Grace H. Harte, "Social Aspects of the Convention," *Women Lawyers' Journal* 26 (1939–40): 29–30.

- 30 See, e.g. Lim, "Sibling Hybridities," 82, 84; and Nguyen, *Race and Resistance*, 34; and Tomo Hattori, "Model Minority Discourse and Asian American Jouis-Sense," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 11.2 (1999): 228–47.
- 31 See, e.g., Lim, "Sibling Hybridities"; Carol Roh Spaulding, "Two Blue-Eyed Asian Maidens: Mixed Race in the Work of Edith Eaton/Sui Sin Far and Winnifred Eaton/Onoto Watanna," in *Asian American Literature in the International Context*, ed. Rocio G. Davis and Sami Ludwig (Hamburg: Lit Verlag, 2002), 21–35; Guy Beauregard, "Reclaiming Sui Sin Far" in *Re/collecting Early Asian America: Essays in Cultural History*, ed. Josephine D. Lee et al. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 340–54; Viet Nguyen, *Race and Resistance*; Teng, *Eurasian*.
- 32 White-Parks.
- 33 Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 86–93.
- 34 Onoto Watanna, "The Half Caste," *Conkey's Home Journal* (November 1898). Reprinted in Watanna, "A Half Caste," 149.
- 35 Edith Maude Eaton (Sui Sin Far) attr., "Half-Chinese Children: Those of American Mothers and Chinese Fathers, Some of Their Troubles and Discomforts," *Montréal Daily Star* (1895): 187.
- 36 Watanna, "The Half Caste," 151.
- 37 Edith Maude Eaton (Sui Sin Far), "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian," *Independent* 66 (January 21, 1909): 125–32, see p. 127; Edith Maude Eaton (Sui Sin Far), *Mrs. Spring Fragrance and Other Writings*, ed. Amy Ling and Annette White-Parks (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995).
- 38 Watanna et al., *Marion*, 1–2.
- 39 Sui Sin Far, "Leaves"; Edith Maude Eaton (Sui Sin Far), "The Persecution and Oppression of Me," *Independent* 71 (August 24, 1911): 421–6; Ferens, *Edith and Winnifred Eaton*, 195n21.
- 40 Sui Sin Far, "Leaves," 131.
- 41 Werner Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 240.
- 42 Edith Maude Eaton (Sui Sin Far), "Sweet Sin," *Land of Sunshine* 8.5 (April 1898): 223–6, see p. 226.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 224; Sui Sin Far, "Leaves," 126.
- 44 Onoto Watanna, "The Story of Ido," *Conkey's Home Journal* (1899): 28. Online resource: http://xtf.lib.virginia.edu/xtf/view?docId=modern_english/uvaGenText/tei/EatSido.xml;brand=default.
- 45 Watanna, "The Story of Ido."
- 46 Sui Sin Far, "Leaves," 129.
- 47 Watanna, "A Half Caste," 177.

PART II



THE EXCLUSION ERA, WORLD
WAR II, AND THE IMMEDIATE
POSTWAR ERA

Indian Diasporic Autobiography: New Nations and New Selves

SANDHYA SHUKLA

Telling the story of the self is a time-honored American literary practice. The centrality of the individual, the trajectory toward social and economic betterment, and the push for differentiation – all conventions of the genre of autobiography – seem easily assimilable to mythologies associated with making America and its citizens. Under the broader rubric of “American autobiography,” two identity-categories have organized important works: “immigrant” and “ethnic.” The first of these focuses on the movement from a place of origin to the United States, and the cultural dilemmas that ensue, while the second concerns itself with the process of integrating into America. Both kinds of writing have been understood to uphold a linear trajectory from one (old) land, into another (new) nation. Even when it is the case that they have betrayed difficulties about life in the United States, most ethnic or immigrant autobiographies center on the fundamental question of what it means to be American.¹ Dhan Gopal Mukerji and Dalip Singh Saund, Indians who came to the United States in the first half of the twentieth century, write their selves through a sustained relationship to homeland and shift the central problematic of American autobiography. In the way that their autobiographical works narrate the paradigmatic “coming to America,” but are really fired, and given form, by the desire for India, they might be seen as part of a subgenre of *diasporic autobiography*. In Mukerji’s *Caste and Outcast* (1923) and Saund’s *Congressman from India* (1961), India is the destination and theme of multiple psychic and geographic crossings, back and forth.

More than any other term for social formations, *diaspora* not only describes the lateral connection across boundaries of nations and states, but also captures the sensibility of continual movement.² It is particularly well suited to the experiences of Mukerji and Saund, men who arrived on the West Coast of the United States in 1909 and 1920, respectively, well before larger numbers of Indians migrated post-1965 but a bit later than a wave of Punjabi Sikh agricultural laborers in the late 1800s, because the formative periods they describe are

ones in which national belonging is very much in flux. Both the “America” and “India” of their musings seem always to be in formation, and thus Saund’s and Mukerji’s relationships to national imaginaries are necessarily the products of significant narrative and psychic labor. These writers might be situated within a canon of South Asian American historical experiences, but their interstitial position, between straightforwardly working-class communities, and more professional and credentialed groups in the late 1960s and early 1970s, means that they do not associate themselves with a larger ethnic or immigrant formation, and their explorations of self easily take shape through individual “I”s of autobiographical narratives. And unlike post-1965 Indians, about whom we have a deeper archive of novelistic, autobiographical, and other kinds of writings, Saund and Mukerji navigate a field that does not have a ready script for identity – ethnic, racial, *or* national.

While *diaspora* evokes homeland, it also elaborates sites of settlement and entanglement. In fact, what *Caste and Outcaste* and *Congressman from India* serve to remind us is that *diaspora* is not just a term of identity, like “ethnic” or “immigrant,” it is also a spatial term that invites speculation about different kinds of psychic and geographic territory. Just as important as India was to Mukerji’s and Saund’s life trajectories was the fact that they moved into the social landscape of the American west, where there were significant numbers of East Asian workers and other racial others. The resulting *relations* are hard to comprehend through frameworks of ethnicity or immigration, which highlight identities flowing from group constitution. But in the employment of *diaspora* we see the possibility of translation across obvious boundaries of subjectivity founded on race or ethnic groupings. *Diaspora* effectively illuminates a developing region in which Asians and Latinos and African Americans are finding, if not solidarity, then some kind of shared racialized experience of U.S. nationality.

Caste and Outcaste and *Congressman from India* enable a rethinking of nation because the national imaginaries are multiple and shifting – not just one particular India or America – and continually being crossed, in diasporic fashion. And it is the exchange between India and America that matters, too. Indianness is a foil for and a path into America, and both these nations are articulated at various points to the self, such that questions of “what kind of India,” “what kind of America,” and “what kind of I” are deeply imbricated. It is as much the form of the diasporic longing (and loss), as the content that is important to unpack. Mukerji relates to India through spirituality, while Saund does so through politics, and this divergence makes more vivid the familiar theoretical insight that nation is a multiply imagined and experienced idea, and in this

case *Indias*, rather than a singular *India*, must be the frame for interpreting diasporic autobiography. Mukerji's spiritual life and Saund's political life lead us to different Americas, too. Mukerji, a wandering soul, cannot comfortably rest in the America he finds, and ultimately (in actual life events) he tragically detaches by committing suicide, effectively leaving nation, family, and self. Saund, by contrast, assimilates an America, this a more relevant detail than the possibility of fully assimilating in America, which diasporic autobiography successfully dismantles. But even more than complicating the "American experience," which many autobiographies by racialized minorities have done quite successfully, *Caste and Outcast*, and even *Congressman from India*, decenter the United States, and in so doing push against the boundaries of American autobiography and American literature more generally.

The Wanderings of Dhan Gopal Mukerji

When Dhan Gopal Mukerji published *Caste and Outcast*, twenty-four years before Indian independence, colonial India was still the frame for ideas in the West about Indianness. For Indian subjects moving and living abroad, the nation as a lived cultural experience and as a signifier was considerably more open – linked to the future promise of a state but not always fully anchored by one. This sensibility, of a nation in formation, finds a structural analogue in the self under construction, and so the diasporic autobiography tells the story of nation. Flux and instability are the hallmark affects of both the Indian migrant and the nation of India in Mukerji's and Saund's writings.

One distinctive feature of *Caste and Outcast* is its foregrounding of a spiritual-philosophical perspective. The very first line of the text reads: "I am a Hindu of Brahmin parentage."³ Although it might seem at first that Mukerji is strategically utilizing the term of *Hindu* for the purposes of a readership that considers all Indians at that time to be Hindus, or "Hindoos" in popular discourse, it soon becomes clear that religiosity really is central to how he constructs his subjectivity, and, importantly, to how he imagines *his* India. On that first page Mukerji writes: "Indian life cannot be understood with even moderate justice, if its constant background of religious thought remains unrealized" (45). Both the introduction by Gordon Chang and afterword by Purnima Mankekar and Akhil Gupta for the reissuing of *Caste and Outcast* in 2002 make the point that Mukerji was, above all, a religious person whose Hinduism animated a sensibility of public service and intellectualism.⁴

But we might step back and ask why Mukerji framed his public story in such terms. The simplest answer would be related to how Mukerji must have

perceived his readership – by the time this book was written, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau had both expressed their interest in the influences of Hinduism, and Swami Vivekananda had visited the Chicago World's Fair in 1893,⁵ so it makes sense to assume that those who would have picked up *Caste and Outcast* had a reference point for Mukerji's religious background. But in the opening pages of his autobiography, Mukerji seeks to create more than a sense of familiarity; it is here where he must develop authority so that readers can begin to sign onto, believe, the story that will be told. Mukerji asks his audience to see Indianness not through racial otherness or political agency, but, instead, through religious faith. If this seems to be a relatively safe option among the various possibilities, it is nonetheless one that may challenge how "India" is seen.

National identity is certainly in the early 1920s a relatively open category – who and what India is, is yet to be determined and constructed – but still, nation as idea and feeling develops a shape because of what it excludes. When Mukerji writes about the expansiveness of humanity and the ideal of tolerance, he puts forth an analytic that pushes beyond the usual enclosures of nation. The consequent affect is less about distinctions between peoples and more about comparisons. Writing about his encounter with Christianity, Mukerji offers a representative anecdote of religious tolerance. He writes of being seduced by Christ after being sent to a Presbyterian school and, surprisingly, not encountering any discouragement from his parents for this devotion. He reports his father as saying: "I want you to learn Christianity. If you are convinced it is wrong, fight it; if you are convinced it is right, embrace it!" And his mother, in response to Mukerji's suggestion that he has found a "real God," remarks: "I have heard of Him from others. He has no quarrel with my God. He is one of my Gods" (53). This idea that all roads lead to one god comes out of a nonparticularist and, I would suggest, more diasporic understanding of religion, predicated as it is on comparison, relation, and breadth. Though there are certainly more specifically state-bound renditions, religion is often a worldly formation, with borders between cultures and nations being continually broken down in the name of spiritual connection. Mukerji seizes upon this cosmopolitanism. Rather than functioning as a compensation for loss of homeland or, even, as a form of identity and set of practices stuck in the past, religion for Mukerji opens up into newness.

Telling this tale, a veritable origin-story, of his own Hindu parents' embrace of Christianity enables Mukerji to say something about a developing self that illuminates India, diaspora, and the world. His family, he says, is tolerant, one that can interact, take in, and possibly be transformed by the encounter

with otherness. By the time Mukerji moves into America, he has already cast himself as a subject with agency and free will, and as someone who has the ability to incorporate what is around him, rather than simply being made into an Other. More than one who is not sufficiently national, Mukerji is multiply national. To term this diasporic is to highlight not just the broader process of migration, scattering people from their original homeland, but also the constantly expanding and shifting sensibilities of those who can accommodate a changing relationship with the homeland and the country. This exalts a way of being in the world that rejects fixities and is comfortable with flux, and is an important entry-point into his life story.

Caste and Outcast, like many autobiographies, manifests a consciousness of the story-telling mode, the idea that anecdotes, memories, and characters can allegorize the development of the self. As diasporic autobiography, this text suggests that nation-narration models self-narration, and here India and Mukerji are primary, if intertwined, characters. How does one tell a story of India? Inasmuch as the line between a “real life story” and a constructed account is fine indeed, we need to ask what fictions this autobiography might be based in. For one thing, India, like all nations, needs a history. This is the case even when Mukerji protests established, and ultimately colonial, practices of writing India’s history; he notes: “Properly speaking, India has no history . . . our history has been written mostly by foreigners” (86). Of course, Mukerji is keenly interested in history, spending a good portion of the text elaborating India’s and Indians’ antiquity. When describing how he as a young man went to Benares for a religious pilgrimage, Mukerji comments: “It is older than any other Indian living city today, at least six hundred years older than Rome, and it has no history. . . . I found stone upon stone telling of the ages that had gone before, but leaving the events unrecorded; I found the ruins of a Hindu temple many layers down, and on this a Mohammedan mosque and above this a Buddhist temple” (86). The emphasis on the layering of artifacts (and their cultures) and, thus, histories, implicitly challenges the notion of a homogeneous past that is a building block of much nationalist ideology.

Mukerji’s emphasis on caste, in the title of this text and also throughout the autobiography, presents a set of problematics regarding history and nation. As a major form of differentiation in Hinduism, caste has been the cause of punishing discrimination and inequality. One line of defense articulates caste as akin, simply, to culture – the idea that the system is so deeply ingrained in Hindu religious life – and therefore not necessarily political. Critics of this tendency argue that caste is inherently and effectively unequal, and dismiss the claims of culture as reactionary, most especially in the contemporary

context of fundamentalist-nationalist movements in India. The questions, then, are why caste is so important to Mukerji's story, and does it make any sense at all to *read* that theme differently here than in other nationalist accounts? In the title of the book, Mukerji poses a contradistinction between the categories of *caste* and *outcast* that might be considered in terms of insider and outsider status, arrayed spatially in India and then the United States, given that the text bridges those two nations. In describing rituals of the caste system, what Hindu priests do (112) and prohibitions on intermarriage (115), the text has a distinctly ethnographic feel, in which Mukerji appears as native informant.⁶ Clearly Mukerji does take caste to be culture, and antique culture at that. An agenda to present India as culturally deep and rich (and therefore independent, in national terms) might underwrite Mukerji's efforts to if not promote then certainly elaborate caste. In this scenario, spiritual culture is linked to nation.

Mukerji's migrations are defined less by need than by longing. Melancholy is the governing affect of the autobiography. Mukerji conveys again and again that he has lost something, though not necessarily left something behind. His desire is for a quality and way of being and thinking that transcends place; a described "longing for the hills" (117) that precedes a trip to the Himalayas might also serve as a metaphor for Mukerji's aspiration to a nonmaterial experience. And his self-description as a "wanderer" (122) helps us think of the autobiographical subject moving around, through, and between nations and across time, and back and forth. The spatial story⁷ is one we associate less with immigration, from one country to another, than with diaspora, with lateral imaginative and material connectivity around the world. Such a diasporic sensibility is more resonant of exile, an ethical "out-of-place-ness," that Edward Said has written about, than it is of a fixed nation of return.⁸ It is not to say that diasporic space does not have locations, because in fact Mukerji's life story achieves its fullest and most vivid possibility when it moves not just to America writ large, but, specifically, to the multicultural landscape of California. Mukerji wanders through a number of different landscapes, in both India and the United States, and in some basic way engages with and takes something from each, much as Walter Benjamin's *flâneur* did.⁹ But somewhat differently from that practice of flanerier, Mukerji does not experience the outside as fully other to the self; his autobiographical subject can see something of himself in others, too.

If the racialization of Mukerji feels constant through the text, the representations of and exchanges with other minoritized peoples in the diverse California landscape have a more developmentalist, and ultimately changing,

character. Even though Mukerji's perspective on America and Americans is almost always translational, describing local cultures and social practices for his readers, we can also see him move from a more distanced take on ethnic and racial others to a distinctive identification and solidarity with different peoples. The first chapter of the second section of the autobiography, titled "Initiation into America," ends, notably, with a description of the kindness of an African American woman with whom Mukerji works. Observing that Mukerji has shoes with holes in them, she passes him money to purchase new ones and generously refuses his repayment of the debt. This anecdote might indeed be part of Mukerji's initiation into America, but it is also his introduction to racial-ethnic exchange. And it compares favorably with Mukerji's relationships with left-wing white Americans, those that frame the chapter entitled "My Socialist 'Friends.'"

Though Mukerji crosses the ocean as a ship worker, he spends a great deal of his text explicating a high-caste background. Readers who are familiar with the backstory of early Indian agricultural labor in California might be curious about Mukerji's interface with these area workers. It is not surprising that an initial description feels anthropological. Mukerji writes: "I went out to the country to work with the Hindu laborers. I found them very hard working people . . . having in general such a low standard of living that the native Americans were agitating against Hindu immigration on the ground that my countrymen were pulling down the wages and getting all the jobs" (203). The move in this passage is toward identification, "my countrymen," even though Mukerji later notes his disapproval ("disgust," in fact) at these workers' willingness to work for low wages. The remainder of the chapter entitled "In California Fields" details a multicultural landscape that includes an Italian boss, Japanese workers, and other South Asian workers. Throughout these sections we see a growing respect and intimacy that come from working with others. By the very end, Mukerji signs on with the Muslim Indian workers to an ultimately successful scheme to trick the bookkeeper to increase the workers' wages. Here is a subjectivity developed in place. Like many Asians on the West Coast, Mukerji finds himself reaching out of one minoritized identity to find solidarity with those who are racialized because of color and class position.¹⁰

This experience certainly complicates the national dichotomies of *Caste and Outcast* that are modeled by the structure of the text, with life in India described in the first of two sections, and the United States in the second. Clear oppositions are indexed to those nations, respectively: confident spirituality and ambivalence, and belonging and exile. To those we might add

other less explicit but important contrasts, between social purity and mixture and between antiquity and newness. While the affect of the autobiography, as I discussed earlier, is nostalgic, even melancholic, the very last parts of the book create different ideological effects. Mukerji writes in the epilogue: “A Hindu, who bears the weight of forty centuries of tradition, is drawn by no country as by America” (222). The justification for this rather strong sentiment has a great deal to do with the future (“more staggering than the past of India” [222]) and how Mukerji perceives America as presenting an alternative to the cultural weight of Europe. He relies on predictable if bizarre oppositions, writing: “America is victorious, India is conquered. America is carefree. India is careworn. . . . America believes in herself. India is too old to believe in herself. India has caste. America aims at equality” (223). Although this diasporic autobiography is in many ways unconventional, it cannot but be concerned with nation. And the part of the text that is most explicitly engaged with that question seems not to follow, stylistically, from what came before; there is something in this commentary on nation that feels forced.

Mukerji seems to suggest, as we will see Saund does, that the only way to think about nation is through comparison. Diasporic experience is perfectly suited to a writing of, even theorization of, nation, precisely because it is about movement between and among nations. For many immigrants to the United States, America stands for newness and the future. Mukerji is hardly immune to this nation’s advertised charms, even though his autobiography until, really, the very end, has not expounded developmentalism or expansionism. He cites multiplicity, saying “America is a seed continent. All the world and all the nations are planting their best and their worst seed in this spring-smitten island” (223). We might resolve, or at least understand, the contradictions of Mukerji’s marshaling of America at the end of a text that has foregrounded other registers of experience through a sensibility about cross-cultural possibility. Here, the diasporic sensibility encompasses Mukerji’s location in a space of minoritized others; this situates *Caste and Outcast* in a trajectory of writings by other Asian American, Latino, and African American authors.

Writing the Political Self of the Nation

In *Congressman from India*, Dalip Singh Saund gives us America and India through an autobiography that also functions as a parable of immigrant success. How could it not be, when Saund’s (exceptional) endpoint is the achievement of becoming the first Indian American, indeed the first Asian American,

congressman? India bookends the story of his represented life: elaborated in the beginning as origin and posited in the end of the text as a destination. Though Saund is extremely, and unambivalently, committed to Americanism, he is very much a diasporic subject, in terms of the general structure of the text and also, specifically, in a *return* to India. Explicitly, traveling to India near the conclusion of the book is part of Saund's internationalist program as a sitting congressman, but read more closely it is an affirmation of self and a way to process longing. Ever-conscious of the circulation of this text, Saund the public figure tells a political story of ascent, of overcoming obstacles and really feeling affiliated with his new nation, but the deeply personal mode of autobiography allows for something a little less predictable in terms of identity, particularly when considered in its place and time.

Like Mukerji, Saund begins his story with a reference to a spiritual-religious background that is linked to a kind of ethical self. Preceding a section on his upbringing, Saund writes: "In private life I have never known a verbal or physical quarrel or fight with anyone. My religion teaches me that love and service to fellow men are the road to earthly bliss and spiritual salvation."¹¹ It may very well be the case that Saund was religious and/or spiritual, but just as in *Caste and Outcast*, the iteration in *Congressman from India* serves to confer authorial legitimacy. The ethnographic feel of the early part of *Congressman from India*, which seems to say "this is our food, our culture, our customs," makes India legible to Americans. Saund notes, on the subject of making speeches on behalf of Indian independence: "I felt at the time that the least I could do for India was to present a true picture of that unhappy land to the people of America. In those days the picture of India which most of the American people carried in their minds had little basis in reality. It was a confused jumble of yogis, snake charmers, and maharajas" (39–40). But, of course, Saund aims to do more than translate India for American readers; his construction of a self for popular consumption is also dependent on India's subjectivity.

A feeling for America is evident very early on in *Congressman from India*. In this text, as in many others by Indian Americans, we see the convention of choosing the United States instead of England as a migration destination. Saund positions the two nations and their relative cultural weight against each other quite explicitly, writing: "I noticed how reverently the British people passed by the tombs of Lord Nelson . . . and the Duke of Wellington, those two great builders of the British Empire . . . I was not interested in empire builders. Abraham Lincoln's statute, however, evoked in me quite a different response" (34). The represented choice between empire and

freedom paves a smooth avenue into U.S. nationalism for Saund. A kind of “Americanism” is fundamental to this text. But interestingly enough, and despite a clear public relations objective, Saund does not actually spend much of the text celebrating America. In fact, Saund constructs his “I” as an Asian subject situated in the California racial landscape. *Congressman from India*, though saturated with dreams of America, nonetheless steers away from an idealized and uncritical perspective on what a writer like Mary Antin had called “the promised land.”¹² Saund is simply less interested in Americanization, per se, but still mobilizes a powerful idea of the nation as broad and inclusive. His unwavering consciousness of himself as Indian recalls other represented minoritized experiences of the United States. Part of what allows these migrant subjects and writers some critical distance on America has to do with racialization, and part of it also derives from their constitution as diasporic subjects, always connected to places outside of the nation and alive to movement, exchange, and encounter in the places where they pause, even as they become citizens.

Saund’s autobiographical tale rests on his exemplarity. Not only a congressman, but also an entrepreneur – he builds a thriving agricultural business – Saund must have overcome significant obstacles to success as an Indian in 1920s–1940s America. He does not shy away from descriptions of discrimination and frank racism, writing: “acceptance was very difficult to obtain in the atmosphere of California in those days, particularly for students from Asia. Prejudice against Asiatic people in California was very intense in the early twenties and I felt keen discrimination in many ways. Outside of the university atmosphere it was made quite evident that people from Asia – Japanese, Chinese, and Hindus – were not wanted” (40–1). Saund also devotes space in this chapter to describing the “Alien Land Act,” which must be the 1913 California Alien Land Law, given that he earlier notes that he was a junior in college in 1917. While his investments clearly lie in redeeming America and Americans – as he notes, again and again, that many local residents were incredibly kind and supportive of his business, his political career, and also his personal relationships – Saund never really separates himself from those who are victims of discrimination. Thus his specialness peculiarly can coexist with implicit inclusion in groups of Indians, of Asians, without necessarily having to declare political interest or, even, community. This is similar to how Mukerji manages his self-constitution. It is certainly the case that neither of these subjects can live outside of race in this period of California history, when Indians were both exotic other and racialized migrant to Americans, but what is less predictable is that they would represent it as such in their public fictions

of self. Mukerji and Saund do not commit to a politics of race of this period, but they are both matter-of-fact about their racial subjectivity. Tellingly this is well before a politics of identity, when the choices between insurgent protest and denial become starker.

It is in Saund's life's work and love, American politics, that we can see these complicated tendencies take root and fully flower. Saund describes a number of issues he takes up once he has won election to the House of Representatives and works on Capitol Hill, particularly those relating to his district, and also to collective bargaining and civil rights. He pays special attention to Native American land claims, as he discusses a controversy surrounding the Agua Caliente Tribe in Palm Springs. In this description, the tone of Saund's writing becomes much more passionate than it had previously been in his text. He uses italics for emphasis and exclamation points ("this was a proposal to turn not the *management*, but the *title* of the Indians' property over to a commission . . . the property involved has a value of \$12,000,000!" [140]), and dramatic language ("The bill seemed to me completely obnoxious . . . the poor Indians would be left quite helpless. I knew . . . how shabbily some American Indians had been treated" [140]). An ideological commitment to antiracism, to use a contemporary term, manifests itself in these moments, as it has in other moments of the autobiography when Saund described discrimination against Asians. But read in the context of Saund's own assumption of minoritized subjectivity, strong sentiments around Native peoples might also reveal an identification with otherness to the nation, even *while* national politics are being elaborated. Another way of arguing this would be to say that Saund's rendered emotion must be about more than a cool assessment of injustice. It might also lay bare some aspect of the developing autobiographical subject. The self is one that relates to others, particularly other racial minorities. This is less a politics of race that national models of multiculturalism explain, than it is a politics of relation, that structural affect central to diaspora. Furthermore, the racial landscape, the context, produces a set of conditions in which we can interpret Saund's (and Mukerji's) tendency to identify with others.

Saund's diasporic subjectivity becomes infinitely more complicated but also more elaborated in the penultimate chapter on geopolitics and an official trip to Asia. One major question remains foregrounded: How to manage Americanism and Indianness? Saund's stance vis-à-vis the Cold War is anti-Soviet, not especially surprising given the dominant political climate while he held office (from 1957 to 1963). He also defends nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands, again upholding dominant U.S. policy and sentiment.

He expresses anxiety over, but also respect for, Sukarno (a nationalist leader and first president of Indonesia) just before the U.S.-supported coup against him. But the carefully constructed U.S. nationalist anticommunist frame for this trip breaks down when Saund arrives in India, and the political-public tone of the book shifts. He writes: "It was truly an affectionate home coming to the State of Punjab" (176). The language that follows is much less measured and more emotional. Upon arriving in Amritsar, Saund mentions his "excitement" upon waking up early and finding a welcome reception. He writes: "There were thousands of people at the railroad station, and we were profusely garlanded and crushed in the huge crowd to the point where our daughter Ellie was temporarily separated from us in the throng" (177). Saund, through the surrogate of his daughter, was literally and figuratively swept away. This represented sensation has nothing at all to do with any part of the political narration, nor does it move the story along or illuminate it in any way. It exists on its own, in confessional mode. Saund represents that emotion through excess, nothing that their reception was "overwhelming" and that they had been offered so many garlands their automobile had to be emptied of them twice a day (178). There is a correspondence between the scale of feeling and the way in which Saund cannot manage it narratively, for the description lies adjacent to the general story of *Congressman from India*, and not incorporated into it.

Like many diasporic subjects, Saund relates to India nostalgically. Nostalgia and longing suffuse his political visit to India. Here is where readers might feel most connected to the author; the public self of Saund is stripped away somewhat, to reveal a person with real feelings. Nostalgia for home and a sense of loss are universal experiences that Saund does not distance himself from. He writes:

There in the village the crowds were so thick that I really didn't have a chance to see all the familiar landmarks. But I did pass by the well and could read clearly what I, as a boy in 1917, had helped inscribe on the brick wall and fill in with blue paint:

"Let us enjoy the company of friends and be gay,

Because the time of parting is growing near."

Three of my cousins and I had inscribed the verse during a summer vacation that year. My three cousins have all died: two by natural causes and one a victim of the mass slaughter at the time of the partition in 1947. But those lines were still legible and the blue paint visible from a distance. That, too, brought tears to my eyes. (179)

It is interesting that the migration experience that Saund conveys to readers is one of separation and dislocation. His autobiographical “I” seeks to connect with the readers through eliciting sympathy for relatives dying early, and for the violent and disruptive partition. Effectively Saund asks his audience to understand, without ever saying “I am just like you.” In this way, his Americanism is diasporic rather than ethnic, for it need not entail giving up another national experience. When it comes to the developing nation-state of India, Saund’s represented feelings echo more contemporary Non-Resident Indian nationalism, pride, and concern about autonomy. Describing an electric project, for example, he writes: “It was perhaps one of the neatest construction jobs I have seen . . . Indians were handling the mammoth buckets and cranes in a masterly fashion. I found out that, to begin with, when work on the dam started, there were seventeen American engineers on the job and now there were only seven” (177).

Saund’s own evaluation of his international trip might be read critically, in ways that the preceding sections of *Congressman from India* may have instructed, but that, for the author, remain unconscious. He asks: “Why should the people in Japan be interested in seeing newsreel pictures of a freshman congressman from the United States arriving in Tokyo? . . . Why did the people of India turn out in great throngs to greet my family and myself wherever we went?” Saund first explains that Indians and Asians more generally experienced pride at his having been elected to Congress, evoking a sensibility of racial solidarity that had been earlier owned by him, and directed into the local California racial landscape. But his second sentiment, about a “great reservoir of respect and affection for the United States of America and its people in that part of the world” (182–3) seems less convincing in the face of a real Third World feeling throughout the Asian countries he has visited at this historical moment. And, finally, the very fact of this autobiography ending in India, not in America, is notable. It isn’t a return, but something else, an evocation of the enduring importance of both nations in the history of the world and also in the story of an *Indian American* who need not, and cannot, leave India behind even as a U.S. congressman. In the contemporary moment, such fluid and dynamic attachments of diaspora would be hard to imagine; for a public figure in 1961, they are astonishing.

More Complicated Than Homeland

If early ethnic autobiography to a large extent focused on Americanization and the writer’s inclusion in the United States, diasporic autobiography

maintains an interest in the subject's navigation between and among nations. Mukerji's and Saund's texts elaborate an America and an India very much in formation, and both their relatively early migration (in the trajectory of South Asian migration to the United States) as well as their dwelling in California help us think through the representational politics of *relation*, not to large ethnic communities of Indians but to a racial landscape that includes other minoritized peoples. These stories of exceptional individuals may both end with a somewhat simplistic discourse of American freedom, but the elaboration of complicated and even contradictory affects throughout serves to maintain otherness, and effectively preserves the boundary between author and reader.

Anthropologists Mankekar and Gupta have remarked on Mukerji's distinctive position as a cultural translator who straddles two worlds, which is also the case for Saund.¹³ When Mukerji and Saund effectively say "this is what India is like, dear reader," they also express longing for something that is more complicated than homeland. And it bears mentioning, too, that both authors are surprisingly modest in their claims about both India and America. While on the surface these texts must be written with an eye to circulation in the United States, they also speak to a racialized and minoritized experience that would resonate with other readers. Both these texts ask if the self is assimilable to and by the nation, or whether a self exists that transcends the nation. *Caste and Outcast* and *Congressman from India*, in title and structure, are all about nations, yet as autobiographies they make the case for subjectivity that is on some level universal, precisely because universality enables the reader to connect to the author. Here, too, is where diaspora becomes an important frame: promoting identification and relation across differences, and posing the question of borders and boundaries, to be respected and also to be transgressed. A desire to be elsewhere, a longing for home, a sense of being outside of a particular social formation, all establish a structure for identification, without a presumptive sameness.

Mukerji and Saund live in worlds of multiplicity and develop public selves well before a contemporary politics of multiculturalism, not to mention the existence of large communities of South Asians that could lay specific, and named, claims to hyphenated ethnicity. Their use of comparison as a literary strategy to explore identification and even, perhaps, race may be the result of the worlds they inhabit. Diaspora is the mode that enables comparison, relation, and crossings. And diaspora, interestingly enough, also enables readers' sympathies and identifications with authors who on the face of it are quite different from them. In this way they achieve a

significant feat, moving out of ethnographic conventions into, more fully, the genre of autobiography, that if nothing else says that an individual story, even one of an Indian migrant both fictional and real, is a story that all of us can relate to.

Notes

- 1 Of course autobiographies by African American, Latino, as well as Asian American writers have blown open presumptions of inclusion in their explorations of a complex U.S. multiculturalism. See Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (New York: Random House, 1969); and Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (New York: Bantam, 1982). Much seminal theoretical work on ethnic and immigrant autobiography has been based on European immigrants' writings, like Louis Adamic's, *Laughing in the Jungle: The Autobiography of an Immigrant in America* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1932) or Mary Antin's, *The Promised Land* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1912). For an excellent critical study, see William Boelhower, *Immigrant Autobiography in the United States: Four Versions of the Italian American Self* (Verona, Italy: Essedue Edizioni, 1982). More recent criticism like: Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong, "Immigrant Autobiography: Some Questions of Definition and Approach," in *American Autobiography: Retrospect and Prospect*, ed. Paul John Eakin (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 142–70, and Floyd Cheung, "Early Chinese American Autobiography: Reconsidering the Works of Yan Phou Lee and Yung Wing," in *Recovered Legacies: Authority and Identity in Early Asian American Literature*, ed. Keith Lawrence and Floyd Cheung (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 24–40, complicate the approach to autobiography significantly, through readings of early Chinese migrant works.
- 2 See Sandhya Shukla, *India Abroad: Diasporic Cultures of Postwar America and England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996).
- 3 Dhan Gopal Mukerji, *Caste and Outcaste* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 45. Further references will be in parenthesis in the text.
- 4 This reissuing of the text reflects, first, a growing interest in early South Asian American texts and, second (but relatedly), the acknowledgment of the place of South Asians in the broader formation of "Asian America" that had previously been largely and effectively constituted by East Asian (Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, etc.) groups, most especially concerning the U.S. west.
- 5 Carl T. Jackson, *The Oriental Religions and American Thought: Nineteenth Century Explorations* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981).
- 6 Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong has discussed how autobiographical accounts of early Chinese migrants have "folkloric" elements that are quasi-anthropological, that emerge from authors' understandings of what an American audience wants. See Wong, "Immigrant Autobiography," 158.
- 7 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) uses this term.
- 8 Edward Said, *Out of Place: A Memoir* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000).

- 9 Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).
- 10 Lucie Cheng and Edna Bonacich, eds., *Labor Immigration under Capitalism: Asian Workers in the United States before World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).
- 11 D.S. Saund, *Congressman from India* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1960), v. Further references will be in parenthesis in the text.
- 12 Antin, *The Promised Land*.
- 13 Mankekar and Gupta, afterword to Mukerji, *Caste and Outcast*, 244.

Koreans in Exile: Younghill Kang and Richard E. Kim

JOSEPH JONGHYUN JEON

Born roughly three decades apart, Younghill Kang (c. 1903–72) and Richard Eun-kook Kim (1932–2009) were the two most prominent early Korean/American writers,¹ if by “early” we mean before the Asian American movement in the late 1960s and the emergence of Asian American literature as an explicit category. Both lived as children through Japanese colonization in what today is known as the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea or North Korea (not to be confused with the Republic of Korea or South Korea). Both immigrated as young men to the United States where they pursued university educations and advanced degrees. As writers and professors in U.S. academic institutions, both also achieved a fair amount of success. Their works, mostly autobiographical fiction, gained a good deal of initial recognition in the United States in part because they offered an insider’s view of a Korean culture in tumultuous times to an audience that could only view it from afar. In addition, they share similar career trajectories: both made an immediate splash in American public culture but soon vanished from public life after a decade or so of high visibility (Kang in the 1930s and Kim in the 1960s) with their books going out of print. Both also gained new audiences for their earlier work either posthumously or late in life: Kaya Press, a publisher specializing in Asian/American diasporic writing, republished Kang’s *East Goes West* in 1997 and Penguin republished Kim’s *The Martyred* in 2011 as part of their Penguin Classics series.

Although Kang wrote his most visible work before the Korean War and Kim produced his afterward, their commonalities might encourage us to read these writers as witnesses to a larger historical continuum that encompasses Korea’s cultural, political, and economic emergence into global modernity, initially under the protection of and later in partnership with the United States, and also one that overlaps an even broader geopolitical recalibration, as the growth of Asian economies in the second half of the twentieth century increasingly demands a revision of earlier models of east-west relations. As

diasporic writers, Kang and Kim do not simply represent exilic Asian figures grappling with new Western environs. They also figure early transnational engagements across national, aesthetic, political, and racial lines, within the context of the gradual transformation of Korea from the so-called Hermit Kingdom, as it was known during the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1897), into the international power that it is today.

Raised as a child in Korea,² Younghill Kang is generally regarded as the first Korean American novelist. Shortly after participating in the March First Movement, a large-scale anticolonial demonstration of some two million Koreans in 1919 protesting Japanese occupation, Kang left Korea for the United States. As his fictional avatar, Chungpa Han, would later describe in his 1937 novel *East Goes West*, his arrival in the United States was “just in time, before the law against Oriental immigration was passed,”³ referring to the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, which buttressed U.S. policies against Asian immigration that had been state policy since 1882.⁴ Kang attended, in succession, Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia; Boston University, from which he received a bachelor of science degree in 1925;⁵ and Harvard University, from which he received a master’s degree in English education. Throughout the 1930s in particular, Kang gained a good deal of visibility in the New York art and intellectual scene. He won a Guggenheim Fellowship, the first Asian ever to do so; curated Asian art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; served as an editor for the *Encyclopædia Britannica*; and taught at New York University. His most acclaimed work during his lifetime, *The Grass Roof* (1931), was published by Scribner and reviewed favorably, most notably by Thomas Wolfe, Kang’s colleague at New York University. Although the initial reception of his second novel, *East Goes West*, was less enthusiastic, it became the text of greatest interest to later Asian American literary scholars because it narrates his experiences in the United States, his home for the rest of his life.

Kang made numerous attempts to become naturalized as a U.S. citizen, including separate special bills introduced specifically on his behalf in the U.S. House of Representative and Senate in 1939. The first was introduced by Illinois Congressman Kent E. Keller and included a supporting document authored by such luminaries as Malcolm Cowley, Pearl Buck, Lewis Mumford, Maxwell Perkins, and Charles Scribner.⁶ Second, West Virginia Senator Matthew M. Neely doubled Kent’s efforts in his chamber, but both bills failed to pass, and Kang was never granted citizenship. Like all Korean Americans until 1943 when the law was changed, he was classified as an “enemy alien” during World War II, the same classification given to Japanese Americans, since at the time Korea was considered part of the Japanese Empire. After the bombing of

Pearl Harbor, Kang gave up his teaching position at New York University and his job at the Metropolitan Museum, and instead worked for the U.S. War Department and published a number of anti-Japanese propaganda pieces in various publications. After the war, he traveled to Korea and worked for the U.S. Army Military Government as an attaché during the occupation in the Office of Public Information before returning to the United States again in 1948. Though he worked on translations of Korean and Japanese literature and as a teacher at various colleges and universities before his death in 1972, his career as a novelist never continued after the publication of *East Goes West*.

Born Kim Ŭn'guk in Hamhŭng, which is today North Korea's second largest city after Pyongyang, Richard E. Kim spent his early years living under Japanese colonial rule and experienced liberation first hand when it came in 1945. Although the lives of the two writers and the thematic terrain they explored overlapped, Kang's major writing was written and published during Japanese colonialism and before the Korean War while Kim's came after both had ended. Unlike Kang, then, Kim experienced the Korean War directly as a soldier in the South Korean military while Kang was already ensconced in New York City. After an honorable discharge from the army in 1954, Kim left Korea for the United States in 1955, not long after the Korean Armistice Agreement was signed in 1953. In the United States, he received his bachelor's degree from Middlebury College and master's degrees from Johns Hopkins University, the University of Iowa, and Harvard University.

His most successful work was his first novel *The Martyred* (1964). Focusing on events that took place during the Korean War, the novel was a *New York Times* bestseller and was nominated for the National Book Award. Also awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1966, Kim taught at a number of U.S. academic institutions, including the University of Massachusetts Amherst, Syracuse University, and San Diego State University. Although he continued to publish in a number of forms and venues until his death in 2009, including children's fiction, essays, and newspaper articles, his most visible major literary works after his first novel were *The Innocent* (1968), a novel based on the 1961 military *coup d'état* in South Korea, and *Lost Names: Scenes from a Korean Boyhood* (1970), a fictional memoir that reflects on Kim's childhood under Japanese colonialism, the end of which coincides with the end of the novel. Like Kang, Kim was unable to match his early literary success; after his last academic appointment as a Fulbright Professor at Seoul National University (1981–83), he spent his later years working as a reporter/narrator on educational Korean television projects, as a columnist for Korean newspapers, and as a translator before his death in 2009.

Younghill Kang in Deep Time

As Asian American studies as a scholarly field has developed, Younghill Kang has become of interest as potentially a proto-Asian American figure. And yet, because of this retroactive interest and the conditions under which it emerged, the literary historical accounts of his life and work have reflected the particular political or theoretical agenda of the critic, as well as the critical practices of specific moments in which the critic wrote. The search for origins is indeed always vexed. For example, Elaine Kim emphasizes Kang's aristocratic heritage and his supposed ambivalence to the anticolonial Korean liberation movement, suggesting that while his work is important as an example of early Asian American writing it remains limited both as a representation of Korean Americans of the period who were mostly underprivileged laborers and because it is overly assimilationist.⁷ Walter K. Lew takes Elaine Kim to task for historical inaccuracies and misrepresentations, pointing out that Kang's *yangban* status, which Lew glosses as "literati or scholar-official class," did not entail privilege because "the case at hand is that of non-office holding families" in remote, political estranged regions of Korea.⁸ As described in *The Grass Roof*, the family met frequent struggles for basic survival. Furthermore, Lew takes issue with Kim's characterization of Kang's involvement in the March First Movement as "peripheral," arguing that Kang "did, in fact, participate intensely in nationalist activities as a bold author, editor, translator, demonstrator, and critic."⁹ Instead, Lew, citing Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s notion of a *signifying monkey*,¹⁰ casts Kang as a "Korean American trickster," whose work achieves a "translating polysemy complex enough to resist both complete assimilation into a deeply hostile America and futile attachment to a lost past."¹¹

Though they cannot be reduced to their respective critical moments and affiliations, the interpretative views of Kang put forward by Elaine Kim and Walter Lew reflect their intellectual stakes. Kim's work represents an early cultural nationalism within Asian American studies that privileged authenticity while Lew's account embodies a slightly later antiessentialist line of thought armed with poststructuralist notions of resistant performativity. How one views figures like Kang becomes a way to foreground contemporary aesthetic and political values, but perhaps at the expense of historical materialism. As Walter Benjamin writes in thinking about historical temporality, "Every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably."¹² Benjamin's implicit standards for historiography are perhaps impossible in practice, but I nevertheless will

use them as an ideal goal in order to pivot away from the Kim/Lew impasse toward a kind of deep-time context in which one might regard Kang's work and historical meaning within broader frames, a mode of inquiry that media archaeologist Siegfried Zielinski describes as capable of accessing "past situations where things and situations were still in a state of flux, where the options for development in various directions were still wide open, where the future was conceivable as holding multifarious possibilities."¹³

While this shift certainly does not free one from the biases of contemporary critical practices, it does have the virtue of putting Kang and his belated commentators in the same global historical frame, one in which Asian interests become increasingly intertwined – both in complicity and conflict – with American interests. In this broader frame, assimilationist critiques and post-structuralist recuperations both become indexes of a larger rupture in global alignment, which provokes complex recalibrations and reformulated alliances under evolving conditions. In this mode, Leif Sorensen has argued that Kang's work arises in "a geopolitical climate in which Korea itself was under erasure due to its status as a Japanese colony" and "bears witness to [Kang's] existence as a literally stateless person."¹⁴ So while claims about assimilation are inevitable in such a context given the great disparities of political capital between Korea and the United States, the more important and subtle questions are the possibilities opened by the liminal position of the exile for "heterotopic mappings," or the charting of what Foucault describes as a space of otherness that would attend to the interwoven complexities underlying his work.¹⁵

One of the historiographic virtues of Kang's work is that both Korea and the United States, from the perspective of an exile, become heterotopic spaces, meta-sites of otherness that reveal the underlying values and desires that animate them. In this respect, *The Grass Roof* and *East Goes West* are travelogues in the mode of Bildungsroman that describe environments that are both familiar and alienating. Told from the point of view of Chungpa Han, an autobiographical stand-in for Kang, *The Grass Roof* is a native account of life in rural Korea, among other places, but one that also justifies his ultimate departure from his ancestral home. As a result, the very questions of nativity and authenticity, particularly within the context of Japanese occupation, become open-ended. The novel begins in an ethnographic mode that introduces early twentieth-century Korean rural life to American audiences, as a kind of alternate universe to the landscapes and vistas of American modernity that Kang would attend to in his second novel. Indeed, though the genre has been complicated over the years, with its scenes of domesticity, rural labor, and customs, this section of *The Grass Roof* might be read in the tradition of

American Literary Regionalism or what has been termed “Local Color” fiction, which is a subgenre of realism that depicts the customs and folkways of a specific place, most often unfamiliar to most readers.¹⁶

However, midway through the novel, these idyllic scenes of folk life give way to a decidedly political orientation as Japanese influence first encroaches on his once isolated village. This political orientation becomes fully realized with the advent of colonialism, which *The Grass Roof* narrates in the chapter entitled “Doomsday” that concludes Book One (the novel is divided into two sections). The narrator’s observation of his village after returning from a brief trip also mirrors the tonal shift from the first half to the second: “When I returned to my home . . . I found a shocking contrast to the mystic world I had just left.”¹⁷ As the novel finds new bearings in these new political conditions, Han becomes increasingly preoccupied with obtaining a Western education. As the son of a scholar, he has already been drawn to Western literature as both a complementary and countering force to his otherwise traditional Asian education, but the new political milieu makes the acquisition of this otherwise foreign knowledge more pressing. Han thus abides by the imperative laid out by his friend and teacher: “Japan has conquered Korea by Western science. We must regain our freedom by a superior knowledge of that science.”¹⁸ The problem of course is that Japan and its institutions of learning also become the most accessible sources for this new knowledge, and so Han, who at one point even travels to Japan for schooling, finds himself in conflict with the very people from whom he seeks education. The conflicted amalgam of attitudes toward the Japanese, blending complicity and compliance with antagonism and resistance, anticipates his uneven engagements with American culture and indoctrination as well in *East Goes West*.

The Grass Roof culminates with an account of Han’s participation in and subsequent imprisonment after the March 1, 1919 movement (a.k.a. the *Samil* Movement), and of a public reading of the Korean Declaration of Independence, a copy of which the novel includes in translation. Written by the great Korean historian Ch’oe Namsŏn, the document ends in Kang’s text with a parenthetical attribution, but instead of using his given name Kang lists the pen name Six Grass Roofs.¹⁹ So, in the final pages of the novel, which was inexplicably republished by Norton in 1975 without Book Two, we learn that its title refers not just to the rustic homes of premodern Korea described in its early pages but also to the nationalist forces that opposed colonial rule. At the very end of the novel, Han departs for the United States, achieving the goal that had driven him since he first became determined to obtain a Western education, a drive motivated by the desire for the cultural and political capital

that he associates with Western learning without having to capitulate to the colonialist aggressions in order to acquire it.

East Goes West picks up where *The Grass Roof* leaves off, with Chungpa Han's arrival in the United States. But before narrating the final leg of his journey across Canada and on a final boat ride from Nova Scotia to New York, the novel begins instead in a poetically philosophical mode, with the image of "An undying bird" that forever flies and an incantatory meditation on time and global space: "And speaking with an Asian's natural bias, it seems to me it is wrong to say, time passes. Time never passes. . . . Time is always there."²⁰ Against what Walter Benjamin would call "homogenous, empty time,"²¹ Kang favors a classical Asian conception of time that is coherent with a Western, Bergsonian modernist understanding of time that, as Charles Tung describes it, pushes "the metaphors of kinship at the heart of generational periodization to their extreme, calling attention to not just parents and peers but coeval ancestors from disparate periods, and emphasizing not lineage but the biological assemblage of anachronisms."²² This deep time disposition allows Kang to think of his own writing not just in the Western tradition, but contemporary with its most profound moments: "the same time that occupied the Roman lovers is the same that Hamlet was insane in, and in the same I write and think of time."²³

One might regard this opening as an embrace of idealized universalism available to all regardless of race. Certainly the desire for the kind of cultural capital implicit in his formulation motivates his pursuit of an American university education, but the novel checks these ideal visions with the harsh realities and material conditions of abject labor that characterize the experience of immigrants like himself in the United States. As David Palumbo-Liu argues, "While Kang imagines a cosmopolitan cultural capital that is supposed to guarantee social commonality, it simply cannot be transposed to the *material* demands of modern urban social life."²⁴ This conflict between idealist and materialist representations of daily life in the United States forms a primary rift in the text, and one that inheres in the very uncomfortable mapping of the Americanization narrative indexed by the novel's subtitle, *The Making of an Oriental Yankee*, onto the genre of Bildungsroman. Such a mapping problematically identifies Americanization as the teleological goal of the kind of spiritual growth that Bildungsroman purports to chart. The problem, however, with this identification is that it conflates the desire for cultural capital with a capitulation to a set of principles, values, and ideological baggage that seems to constitute a betrayal of the subject's native orientations; and this is a betrayal that the cultural nationalist cannot abide. While these might indeed be the terms of the exchange, what threatens to disappear in this confusion is

the fact that cultural capital and not assimilation remains the primary object of desire.

To stem this problem of historical amnesia, the novel literalizes its dialectical concerns by bifurcating the issue into two explicit figures, the narrator Chungpa Han and Won Kim, a Korean man living in the New York and Han's best interlocutor for his literary, artistic, and cultural interests. Kang's editor at Scribners, Maxwell Perkins, encouraged Kang to make more of Han's relationship to Trip, a white American woman whom Han courts throughout the novel and who was modeled on Kang's wife Frances Keely, and more specifically "to show definitely that you married her, because the fact that you did, makes one of the principal points of the book, in that the Easterner became a Westerner through marriage."²⁵ This change, which Kang refused, would have also put in greater relief the contrast between Han and Won Kim, whose relationship with Helen, the daughter of a white American family resistant to the match, ends in separation due to the machinations of her family, causing him despair and leading him ultimately to suicide. Particularly in the case of Kim, the romantic relationships of the characters have political coordinates, as Perkins' revision notes imply and Leif Sorensen has stated more explicitly, that the failure of these relationships "represents the statelessness of Korean exiles."²⁶

Instead of ending the novel with the happy union of marriage (though it does keep open the possibility of future romance between Han and Trip), the novel concludes instead in irresolution, with a dream that is roughly divided into two parts. In the first, Han sees his childhood friends across a long suspension bridge, which he tries unsuccessfully to cross to meet these old playmates, but instead becomes preoccupied with the objects falling out of his pockets, most significantly money and the keys to his American car. Descending into a dark cellar in order to locate them, Han then dreams of a group of "frightened-looking Negroes" that seem to be hiding from a group of menacing men outside who seem to be preparing for a lynching (*EGW*, 401). In trying to help the Negroes, Han ends up dying with them when the men outside burn down the building in which they are hiding. In awakening from the dream, Han remembers it "according to Oriental interpretation," in which dreaming of death is a good omen (*EGW*, 401). In terms that resonate with Walter Lew's reading of Kang's work, Stephen Knadler reads this complex amalgam of racial violence, incomplete migration, and redemptive optimism as a highly problematic attempt to produce a "coalitional memory," in which the ruptures signal the difficulties of avoiding "a countercultural practice that assimilates the foundational logic of twentieth-century whiteness."²⁷ While

Knadler's account compellingly coordinates Kang's complicated identity formation in his new environs as well as the uneven pressures that help shape it, it also seems to downplay the complexity of Kang's vexed understanding of his new home in triangulated relation to a lost homeland as an exile as well as the influence of a colonizing power. The vertiginous oscillations of the final dream sequence – between despair and optimism, sympathy and cruelty, connection and alienation – register to my mind less as a realized political praxis encountering constraints, and more as an inchoate attempt to map the coordinates of disparate cultural, economic, and political forces that have only recently begun to collide.

Richard E. Kim and Disconcerting Proximities

Richard E. Kim all but disappeared from both scholarly discourse and the public eye after his initial flourish as a best-selling author. Unable to repeat the success of his first novel, *The Martyred*, Kim's work also failed to register in early discussions of Asian American literature in part because of his focus on Asians in Asia rather than on more diasporic figures in the United States. Elaine Kim, for example, excludes him entirely from her discussion of Korean American writers in her otherwise capacious 1982 study *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context*, the text that features Younghill Kang with a good deal of prominence. She does, however, include him in her 1997 review essay for King-Kok Cheung's *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*. What emerges in the intervening time is an interest in the increasingly volatile relationship between Asia and the United States begun during the Cold War, and specifically in relation to the various hot wars in Asia that occurred under the rubric of U.S. anti-communism and that complicate the dominant history of the Cold War, with its traditional focus on the West. In such a revisionist history, the United States becomes first an aggressive presence, both figuratively and literally, on the landscape of Asian economics and politics, only to be challenged by emerging Asian powers beginning at the end of the twentieth century, establishing then a new geopolitical environment that threatens the end of the American century. In this mode, Jodi Kim has argued that the Cold War, which was only cold from the point of view of the United States and Europe, functions ideologically and rhetorically as a cover for U.S. imperialist aggression in Asia, and more importantly for the imposition of a new neocolonial global order in which the United States could maintain the benefits of colonial economic relations "without the burden of actual formal colonial rule."²⁸

In this geopolitical context, perhaps it is not surprising that an abiding trope in Richard E. Kim's work is a preoccupation with disconcerting proximities and a consistent concern for the problem of uncomfortable alliances. *The Martyred* narrates the three-month occupation of Pyongyang by U.S.-led anti-communist forces at the end of 1950, the only instance of military occupation of communist territory in the history of the Cold War.²⁹ Although it does not present itself as a counterhistory (quite the contrary as we will see), the exceptional nature of the subject matter, as an example of U.S. divergence from its most typical and overtly professed Cold War military practices, opens a space in which to read against dominant historical narratives. Told from the point of view of Captain Lee, an officer serving in South Korea's Counterintelligence Corps (CIC), the novel narrates the case of fourteen Christian ministers, all but two of whom were murdered by North Korean forces, and focuses on Reverend Shin, one of the survivors, who becomes complicit in South Korean intelligence attempts to cast the victims of the murders as martyrs, despite his knowledge that their deaths were not at all heroic. It turns out that Shin was spared because of his bravery rather than cowardice (the other survivor was released because he went mad), which he falsely confesses in public to serve the political demands of both the state and church. At once a moralist and a skeptic resistant to Christian beliefs, Captain Lee disapproves of the deceit even as he performs his duties as a state functionary, but flips his opinion of Shin when the minister confesses that, despite his lifelong search for God, he does not believe. Moved by Shin's confession, Lee realizes that Shin maintains his ministry not based on his own beliefs, but rather on the sense that Christian belief has an instrumental value in allaying despair among desperate people, so much so that Shin stays behind even as Southern forces retreat from Pyongyang. From Captain Lee's perspective Reverend Lee shifts from serving a mechanical role in larger propagandistic efforts spearheaded by governmental and religious interests to orchestrating his own personal mission that attends to individual suffering, however compensatory those efforts might be. In this mode, the political virtue of the novel is its interest in disarticulating state interests from those of war's more immediate victims.

But by shifting attention to the drama of human torment, the novel also seems to lose its grip on the political stakes of the war at the widest scales. Perhaps most importantly, as Christine Hong argues, "at almost every turn the novel disavows the driving U.S. role in the war."³⁰ Indeed, we only finally see American troops at the very end of the novel as Captain Lee leaves Pyongyang, looking back at the burning city as aerial forces begin to destroy the bridges over the Taedong River. Furthermore, as Hong points out, this

elision dovetails with a good deal of Western Cold War discourse, which obscures hot war aggressions and indeed atrocities on the part of the United States and South Korea by trumpeting the strategy of *containment*, ignoring in this case the bloody history of the Pyongyang occupation and questions of U.S./South Korean culpability. The novel thus, in Hong's account, participates in the very acts of counterintelligence that it narrates and Captain Lee finds dishonest, by engaging in "a metafictional account of destabilizing instrumentality of the fiction of war" as well as "the elision of the counterrevolutionary violence of the Pyongyang occupation and the driving role of the CIC in that political terror."³¹ In this context, *The Martyred* might function as record not of U.S. hegemonic intrusion, but of its disappearance within the ideological narrative that comes to codify Cold War-era hot wars within less disconcerting formulations.

The novel ends at a refugee camp near Pusan, where Captain Lee has been recovering from an injury sustained in the battle of Seoul. Leaving the company of Minister Koh, Lee narrates the scene at the camp: "I walked away from the church, past the rows of tents where silent suffering gnawed at the hearts of people – my people – and headed toward the beach, which faced the open sea. There a group of refugees, gathered under the starry dome of the night sky, were humming in unison a song of homage to their homeland. And with wondrous lightness of heart hitherto unknown to me, I joined them."³² Doubling the movement in retreat from Pyongyang, Captain Lee walks away from the church, which he has left before the end of the service and even the end of the prayer. Instead of participating in the worship, Lee in a moment of metaphoric lyricism meets the hearts of the North Korean refugees when he hears their song for their absent homeland, which seems addressed across the expanse of open sea and upward under the dome of sky toward the planet at large. In identifying with both the sorrow and courage of the song, the narrator decides to accept also its implicit invitation to participate in a global vision. Choosing the voices in songs outside of the church over those in prayer inside, the end of the novel settles on a utopian vision for (re)unification. The vision, bound to planetary images, opposes the more immaterial promises of the church, but seems equally mystified by the architecture of the structures that relegate it to the realm of wistful fantasy. If the central secret of the novel is the individual heroic deceit of Reverend Shin who hides his disbelief for the greater good, then the foregrounding of this secret seems to draw fire away from other, more significant material forms of deception.

A sequel to *The Martyred* published four years afterward, *The Innocent* offers a fictionalized account of the 1961 military *coup d'état* in South Korea, which

ousted the civilian government and inaugurated nearly three decades of military rule in the nation. Born from dissatisfaction with the corruption and ineffectiveness of the civilian government, the military-led revolution in the novel is characterized as an uncomfortable marriage between progressive ideals, figured by the novel's protagonist Major Lee (the now promoted Captain Lee from *The Martyred*) and ruthless brutality, represented by Colonel Min. The two had been friends and colleagues as university teachers before the war, the outbreak of which revealed their very different temperaments, even though they remained allies throughout it, continuing afterward in united service as members of the Command Group organizing the coup. Such an unlikely pairing makes sense in the South Korean military, which as Major Lee takes pains to point out is the location of liberal intellectualism in South Korean culture, primarily because many liberals who fled the communist north saw their military service as ideological resistance.³³

The tension within the friendship between Min and Lee thus offers in miniature the larger problems that characterize this heady moment of both possibility and terror; the novel describes in great detail the various complexities, competing interests, and disconcerting complicities that arise within the highly factionalized organization of the coup. The ruthless pragmatist Colonel Min plays the more central role in making what he regards to be the necessary but unfortunate decisions that push their efforts toward success, whereas Major Lee, increasingly marginalized by the coup's leadership, plays the role of the benighted conscience of the movement, voicing, often to deaf ears, the need to maintain moral integrity. Significantly, the coup takes place while Lee has been taken at the request of Colonel Min to Japan and cared for by a Korean American operative, named George, with a connection to the American military. By the end of the novel, both Min and Lee realize that they need the other to balance out incomplete tendencies. Despite the frustration each feels about the other's actions and opinions, they seem to accept that national progress requires the alliance between cold-blooded efficacy as well as passionate idealism in order to accomplish the political changes to which they aspire. Despite his opposition to violence and his physical and figurative distance from the bloodshed of the coup, Major Lee cannot plausibly retain his sense of innocence. Ironically, these realizations coincide at the end of the novel with Colonel Min's death and Major Lee's departure to the United States, an ending that resonates powerfully with the end of Younghill Kang's *The Grass Roof*.

An American presence is more pronounced in *The Innocent* than in *The Martyred*, and is specifically manifested in the figure of Colonel McKay, an

American military official who represents both the United States' quiet support of the coup as well as the points of its divergent interests. Appearing throughout the novel mostly as a friendly advisor and ally to the group organizing the coup, Colonel McKay emerges in a climactic moment in the novel in the aftermath of the coup to broker a trade (he is disparaged as "a double dealer") between a uncooperative general that the United States had been protecting in exchange for a pair of officers revealed to have clandestine ties with the North.³⁴ Though subtle, the moment registers a small but certain interruption to the overall picture of friendship and alliance that the novel seems otherwise to present. This interruption causes the reader to reevaluate moments like the one in which Min and Lee joke about the pervasiveness of American surveillance of allied South Korean military personnel: "I suppose they have bugged practically everyone in the country who is somebody."³⁵ Though his appearances in the novel are intermittent, McKay's power and reach seem to cause a certain amount of unease for the future of the U.S.-ROK partnership. In this respect, Lee's experience under American care in Japan is perhaps prescient: "The car was going fast on an American-style highway. The rain had become heavy. There were few cars on the road. I tried to look out ahead of us through the windshield. George turned on the radio, which blared out American-style rock and roll music; the voices with the loud music could have been either Japanese or English. Was I really in Japan?" Perhaps a cynical rejoinder to the voices of North Korean refugees that sing in unison at the end of *The Martyred*, the song bespeaks the danger of co-optation when the call across the water meets with an answer.

Although Kim never explicitly makes the connection in either case, the combination of familiarity and distrust that characterizes the relationship between the South Korean military officers and Colonel McKay also resonates with his description of everyday life during the Japanese colonial occupation of Korea in his collection of autobiographical stories, *Lost Names: Scenes from a Korean Boyhood* (1970). Although the various tensions, conflicts, and forms of cooperation are certainly inflected differently in *Lost Names*, what remains consistent is the unsettling sense of familiarity born out of proximity that seems governed by forces and powers beyond the everyday. Geopolitical power asymmetries transmute, in *Lost Names*, into the microaggressions of everyday colonial life in rural areas at the hands of Japanese schoolteachers or small town police officers. When news of Japanese surrender to the Americans in World War II and thus the end of the colonial occupation reaches the small town in which the story's child narrator grows up, historical transformation comes somewhat into focus, but in a way that seems removed from the limited

realm of the town's experience. Taken as a whole, Kim's fiction seems implicitly to question the costs of partnership and complicity with the various global powers that have taken interest in Korea during its modern history.

The Exile's Global View

Perhaps it is no coincidence that both Younghill Kang and Richard E. Kim worked as translators after their respective short-lived careers as novelists petered out. In some respect, fiction for both writers involved not only presenting a foreign culture to an American audience but also narrating the various complexities of intercultural exchange. Their work offers perhaps a sense of what Min Hyoung Song has described as a kind of Asian American *planetaryity*. In contrast to globalization, which often seems more about power-seeking sovereignty in a discourse that foregrounds division, restriction, and hierarchy, planetaryity tracks movement, connection, and "a humbler sense of personal agency" in an effort to honor the contingencies that globalization perhaps elides.³⁶ The position of the exile that both Younghill Kang and Richard E. Kim occupy is one of double displacement, in which neither the old nor new locations feel like home. This position, however, is one of privilege when the task is to view the planetary tectonics of global realignment, the ground shifting beneath our feet. For Kang and Kim, it is specifically the geopolitical changes inaugurated by emergent and resurgent American-century imperialism and hegemony in myriad forms that forge new alliances and partnerships that flower into happy marriages or falter into disconcerting proximities and competing interests. One important value of these early Asian American writers then is in their interest in mapping the coordinates and fault lines of this emerging world order. On an interpersonal scale that anticipates broader forms of international engagement, their characters adumbrate the nascent pathways of interactions, conflicts, and complicities that eventually constitute what we mean when we speak of the transnational and the global.

Notes

- 1 In employing the *solidus* in Korean/American, I am following David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 1. Palumbo-Liu's *solidus*, which he uses in his formulation Asian/American, "at once instantiates a choice between two terms, their simultaneous and equal status, and an element of indecidability, that is, as it at once implies both exclusion and inclusion." The virtue of such a formulation is that it accommodates shifting the historical relations of the terms that are divided by the *solidus*.

- 2 There remains some uncertainty regarding Kang's date of birth. The registration book at Dalhousie University lists May 10, 1899, making him twenty-one years old when he first enrolled at Dalhousie on September 28, 1920. However, Kang elsewhere reports 1903 as the year of his birth. See Younghill Kang, "Oriental Yankee," *Common Ground* 1.2 (1941): 59. I thank Karen Smith, a librarian at Dalhousie, for confirming this information.
- 3 Younghill Kang, *East Goes West: The Making of and Oriental Yankee* (Chicago: Follett Publishing Company, 1965), 5.
- 4 There is also some disagreement about his immigration date that stem from Kang's own imprecision on the topic. Lew suggests 1919, while other sources, including the 1997 Kaya Press edition, which Lew criticizes as error-ridden, suggest 1921. The jacket copy on the 1965 Follett version dates his arrival to New York as 1922. See Walter K. Lew, "Grafts, Transplants, Translation," in *Modernism, Inc.: Body, Memory, Capital*, ed. Jani Scandura and Michael Thurston (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 185 n2. Given that the Dalhousie records indicate that he was enrolled there from 1920 to 1922, Lew's date is the most likely.
- 5 The junior year biographical note for Kang in the Boston University yearbook reads, "If you hear a polite 'What does this word mean, please?' anywhere about the men's room, know that it is the voice of Younghill. To a man who can make speeches in the English language after less than three year's struggle with it, we doff our hats. Best of luck Younghill." The senior year note reads: "Korea couldn't contain so patriotic a soul as Kang, any more than the class-rooms can hold his voice. Those vociferations pour into the halls, luring professors to their doors in wrath – wrath which turns to baffled admiration when bell after bell ringeth closing time, but Younghill keepeth steadily on." My deepest gratitude to Susan Wishinsky, a librarian at Boston University, for bringing these notes to my attention.
- 6 Stephen Knadler, "Unacquiring Negrophobia: Younghill Kang and Cosmopolitan Resistance to the Black and White Logic of Naturalization," in *Recovered Legacies: Authority and Identity in Early Asian American Literature*, ed. Keith Lawrence and Floyd Cheung (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 104.
- 7 See Elaine H. Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 32–43; Elaine H. Kim, "Searching for a Door to America: Younghill Kang, Korean American Writer," *Korea Journal* 17.4 (1977): 38–47; and Elaine H. Kim, "Korean American Literature," in *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, ed. King-Kok Cheung (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 158–60. The last of these three writings exhibits a greater degree of appreciation for Kang's work, particularly *East Goes West*.
- 8 Lew, "Grafts, Transplants, Translation," 176.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 177.
- 10 Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 236–40.
- 11 Lew, "Grafts, Transplants, Translation," 175, 182.
- 12 Walter Benjamin, "These on the Philosophy of History," in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 255.
- 13 Siegfried Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 10.

- 14 Leif Sorensen, "Re-Scripting the Korean-American Subject: Constructions of Authorship in New Il Han and Younghill Kang," *Genre* 39 (2006): 144.
- 15 Ibid. See Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias," *Architecture, Movement, Continuité* 5 (1984): 46–9.
- 16 See Eric Sundquist, "Realism and Regionalism," in *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, ed. Emory Elliott et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 501–24.
- 17 Younghill Kang, *The Grass Roof* (Chicago: Follett Publishing Company, 1966), 170.
- 18 Ibid., 185.
- 19 Ibid., 340.
- 20 Kang, *East Goes West*, 3.
- 21 Benjamin, "These on the Philosophy of History," 262.
- 22 Charles M. Tung, "Modernist Heterochrony, Evolutionary Biology, and the Chimera of Time," in *This Year's Work in the Oddball Archive*, ed. Jonathan Eburne and Judith Roof (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, forthcoming).
- 23 Kang, *East Goes West*, 3.
- 24 David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossing across a Racial Frontier* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 121.
- 25 Maxwell Perkins to Younghill Kang, February 8, 1937, quoted in Lew, "Grafts, Transplants, Translation," 174.
- 26 Leif Sorensen, *Alternative Modernisms: Genealogies of Critical Multiculturalism* (manuscript). Cf. Patricia P. Chu, *Assimilating Asians: Gendered Strategies of Authorship in Asian America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 35. Chu describes Trip as an "ideal reader" for Han, endowed with the power of legitimating Han's claims to America as a spiritual home.
- 27 Knadler, "Unacquiring Negrophobia," 98–9.
- 28 Jodi Kim, *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 25.
- 29 Charles K. Armstrong, "The Cultural Cold War in Korea, 1945–1950," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 62.1 (2003): 74.
- 30 Christine Hong, "Pyongyang Lost: Counterintelligence and Other Fictions of the Forgotten War," in *American Literature and Culture in an Age of Cold War*, ed. Steven Belletto and Daniel Grausam (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), 153.
- 31 Ibid., 157.
- 32 Richard E. Kim, *The Martyred* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 199.
- 33 Richard E. Kim, *The Innocent* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), 238.
- 34 Ibid., 348.
- 35 Ibid., 156.
- 36 Min Hyoung Song, *The Children of 1965: Writing and Not Writing as an Asian American* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 185, 192.

Filipino and Filipina Voices

DENISE CRUZ

In the early 1930s, Filipina author Felicidad Ocampo published her first two books in the United States. Her debut novel *The Lonesome Cabin* (1931) was a romance that centered on the adventures of a woman from the rural Pacific Northwest, her move to the city, and her developing career.¹ The second, *The Brown Maiden* (1932), focused on a dramatically different subject: an elite Filipina who falls in love with a white U.S. army captain, elopes with him, and battles “race prejudice” in Manila.² Ocampo followed these books with serial romances published in the Philippines. Her works are held together by their interest in independent, educated, and mobile women. Ocampo’s characters are social workers, doctors, and lawyers, and they question romantic partnerships and marriage. In creating this cast, she drew upon her own transpacific experiences. Accounts of her life, though brief, place her in New York and Berkeley for law and social work, in Washington as a nurse on a Native American reservation, and even in Hollywood for a stint as a screenwriter.

Ocampo’s feminist career, transpacific biography, and romance novels offer one way to narrate the beginnings of early Filipina/o American literature. This starting point diverges substantially from the usual pathways and figures of Filipina/o American literary history, which often take as their focus the work of Carlos Bulosan and Bienvenido N. Santos. Bulosan’s *America Is in the Heart* (1946) and Santos’s *Scent of Apples* (1979) have long held canonical status, and for good reason.³ These texts speak to the vexed history of Filipino migration to the United States and the lingering repercussions of the U.S. occupation of the Philippines (1898–1946). They explore the difficulties of the Filipino migrant community, its relationship to labor movements, and tensions between elite nationals and migrant workers. They are also notable for their representation of white and Filipina women, who are often idealized by homesick Filipino men to attenuate their desire for a homeland.

In this chapter I read these strands of Filipina/o American literature as constitutive and entwined, for early-twentieth-century Filipina and Filipino

American literary production is best understood when read for its transpacific and gendered complexities.⁴ Scholars frequently cite the study of this literature as shaped by archival impossibilities, especially because of the scarcity of known literary texts. Indeed, during the 1970s emergence of an Asian American canon, one of the dominant frameworks for reading the novels, poetry, and prose produced in this period initially centered on defining what did and did not count as a “Filipino American” text. The authors of the introduction to Filipino American literature in the Asian American anthology *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (1974) phrased this conundrum in oft-quoted and now roundly criticized terms, with the claim that early Filipino American literature simply did not exist. Instead, they asserted that writers such as Carlos Bulosan, Manuel Buaken, Juan Cabrereros Laya, Steven Javellana, Carlos Romulo, and Maximo Kalaw were immigrants who “wrote about American experience through Philippine heads.”⁵

Over the past two decades, however, the boundaries of early Filipina/o American literature have changed, in large part because of the turn to transnational and diasporic methods. As Asian American scholars began to stress the importance of Asian-U.S. relations in influencing patterns of migration, the defining characteristics of Filipina and Filipino literature also shifted. We now readily include works authored by men and women who, though they may have migrated or traveled to the United States, are nevertheless key to the development of this literary tradition.⁶ The recognition of transpacific and diasporic dynamics in Asian American literature writ large has complemented archival studies and important recovery efforts that have yielded new primary texts.⁷

The recasting of Filipino and Filipina literary history has also had important repercussions for how we read gendered constructions of national identities and communities. Early Filipina/o American literature was once primarily associated with the male laborer or exile. This focus on men reflected patterns of migration to the United States. For much of the early twentieth century, the majority of Filipinos migrating to the United States and its territories were male laborers. Although Filipina women also traveled to the United States at this time, their statistical presence was dramatically smaller. Ambo, a character in Bienvenido N. Santos’s short story “So Many Things,” tellingly observes, “there were very few Filipino women in the United States. There was a time when he didn’t see one for years and years.”⁸ Such trends, when combined with the relative lack of known Filipina-authored materials, have had other consequences for the study of Filipina and Filipino American literature. The focus on the Filipino exile is accompanied by a dominant image of the Filipina: a

haunting presence, a woman idealized yet contained within the Philippines as a representative of the male exile's longing for home. Countering these limitations, feminist scholars have documented the presence of Filipinas in the United States through the recovery of oral and community-based histories and print materials.⁹

This chapter breaks this pattern further. What follows is certainly an effort of archival revision. Yet, building upon the work of others, I also contend that the circumstances of Filipina and Filipino literary production in the early twentieth century were transpacific, influenced not only by the occupation of the Philippines and U.S. imperial history but also by factors that range from the social and cultural to the aesthetic and representational: public discourse surrounding Filipina/o bodies in the United States, the intersection of the Filipina feminist movement with global women's suffrage, shifting notions of gender and sexuality, and experiments in literary form. Developments in Filipina transpacific feminism are conversant with, and contribute to, literary engagements with male migrant and exilic experience. Moreover, these writers and their careers reveal critical elements of early Filipina/o American publication history, which features a range of texts produced in venues that included the periodical press and book format, and in varied genres that, in addition to the more familiar novel and short story, also included the memoir, poem, and popular romance.

Empire and the Production of Filipina and Filipino Literature

It is impossible to separate Filipina and Filipino cultural production in English from the gendered context of empire.¹⁰ The U.S. occupation of the Philippines had three effects: the creation of an English-literate elite, the establishment of English as one of the Philippines' national languages, and the quick emergence of literature in English. At the end of the Spanish American War (1898), the United States acquired the Philippines, and for the first time had to reckon with the possibility of indefinitely governing far-off territories. The United States now faced an ethical problem. How could the U.S. government justify holding onto these possessions, especially given the grounding of the Spanish American War in ostensibly moral imperatives of liberation? President William McKinley articulated the official response to this ambiguity in what he called "benevolent assimilation." Because Filipinos and Filipinas were unfit for self-government, the United States would fulfill its duty to the islands by educating America's "little brown brothers." Departing significantly from

Spain (and a more than three-century long rule that led to only a small minority of Filipinas and Filipinos literate in Spanish), by the time the first decade of the occupation had passed the United States had mandated English as the national language, constructed a public education system staffed by American teachers, and founded the University of the Philippines, a system modeled after institutions like the University of Michigan. Within only two decades, an elite group centered in the capitol city of Manila began producing literature in English at a rapid rate.

The occupation also influenced migration to the United States and created significant class divisions in the Filipina/o community abroad. These divisions recur in the pages of early literature. The efflorescence of the Filipino migrant community on the West Coast makes visible the intersection between the U.S. empire and a system of global capitalism that was increasingly dependent upon Asian labor. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, exclusion laws prevented immigration from China, Japan, Korea, and India. In contrast, Filipina/os occupied an in-between status as nationals. In need of a new labor force, industries based on the West Coast, in Alaska, and in Hawai'i began recruiting Filipino nationals, and the 1920s and 1930s saw the migration of tens of thousands of Filipinos, who would eventually become known by the then-derogatory term *Pinoys* and later as the *manong* generation. Migration to the United States was not restricted until the passage of the Tydings McDuffie Act in 1934, which granted the Philippines commonwealth status but also substantially limited immigration to only fifty people per year.¹¹

The United States also actively recruited another class of Filipinas and Filipinos. Pensionados, government-funded students who were selected for American baccalaureate, graduate, and professional programs, formed a smaller group living, studying, or working in the States. As part of the logic of benevolent assimilation, these "professional" men and women were expected to return to their country, ostensibly to serve as leaders in the Philippines.¹² It was this venue that allowed writers such as Ocampo and José García Villa to travel to the United States. Indeed, one of the notable factors of Filipino American literary history is that most of its central figures had some sort of formal engagement with the U.S. government, whether it is Santos's experience with the State Department during World War II, Yay Panlilio's work with the U.S. military, or Ocampo's tenure with the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

While their counterparts in Manila had the benefit of a community of writers, a vibrant periodical press dedicated to the development of English literature, and a network of sponsors through universities, authors in the United States faced a dramatically different publishing climate. Some

migrant communities produced small periodicals; these venues corresponded to newsletters and monthlies created by elite Filipinos for those who were living or studying abroad, such as Manuel Quezon's *The Filipino People* or the Berkeley-based *Filipino Students' Magazine*.¹³ Villa and Bulosan were notable because they broke into the mainstream U.S. publishing market. Others, such as Ocampo and Panlilio, turned to book format as the primary mode of publication. Whether they published in the Filipino community press or in mainstream U.S. outlets, authors circulated their work in the context of public discourse that represented Filipina/os as objects of fascination (tied to the new acquisition of the islands) or fear (linked to the threat of racial tension surrounding migrant communities on the West Coast). The next few sections examine how Villa, Ocampo, and Bulosan negotiated these dynamics, before concluding with a discussion of how Santos and Panlilio responded to changing perceptions of Filipina/os in the United States after the Pacific War.

José Garcia Villa, Filipino Masculinity, and Queer Poetics

Villa and other early Filipina/o authors contended with what Colleen Lye calls "racial forms," stereotypes that linked Filipinos and other Asians to the perceived danger of migrant laborers, constructions of aberrant masculinities, and the uncertain status of miscegenation in the United States.¹⁴ In the 1920s, U.S. discourse produced the threatening figure of the Filipino migrant. The Filipino man was a specter of labor debates in the United States, a member of potentially deviant bachelor communities, and a representative of dangerous hypersexualized masculinities. Amid this context, José Garcia Villa, disenchanted with the Manila literary scene, moved to the United States. Though he would later vehemently declare that he did "not write about the Filipino, I write about MAN," as Timothy Yu, Martin Joseph Ponce, Jonathan Chua, and others have asserted, Villa's work speaks to the contrary.¹⁵ Villa's career as a transnational literary figure was extraordinary. He became part of communities of modernist writers in the United States, published in major literary establishments, established his own small journal *Clay*, and was a Pulitzer Prize finalist. Yet as Yu notes, Villa and his work would eventually be forgotten, wedged aside in the formation of two canons: Asian American (in part because of his formally innovative aesthetics and interest in poetry) and American modernist (because his ethnic body presented an uneasy fit within "American" literature).¹⁶

Villa's first major publication, *Footnote to Youth* (1933), wrestles with the difficulties of aesthetics, publication, and affiliations that cross the bounds of race, class, gender, and sexuality. The collection's subtitle *Tales of the Philippines and Others* captures the factors that make this work remarkable. The "tales" in the collection can be split into categories, with the Philippine stories focusing on regionalist representations of the Filipino and Filipina "folk," while the "other" tales are comprised of (a) numbered prose poems that elucidate a narrator's love for men and women as tied to the creation of innovative literary poetics, or, (b) as Ponce observes, stories that construct a portrait of the Filipino writer as artist.¹⁷ The regionalist tales of *Footnote to Youth* garnered praise in the United States for their presumed verisimilitude – their capture of the sights, sounds, and flavors of the Philippines. In contrast, critics were unmoored by the "other" tales and their formally abstract technique.

The disjunction in Villa's work centers on what I have elsewhere called "irreconcilabilities," the uneasy or disruptive factors that complicate strategies of representation.¹⁸ On the one hand, Villa's text is notable because the formally innovative "other" tales imagine alternate forms of gender and sexuality. But on the other hand, the representation of queer love in the text is also difficult and sometimes troubling. While the narrator describes his search for ways to express his love for working-class men in sentences that "were as beautiful as the dancer in the dawn," the collection also includes fraught representations of heterosexuality in the Philippines that often take the form of violence on women's bodies.¹⁹ *Footnote* departs from celebratory readings of the United States as a site for queer liberation; instead, Villa underscores the painful experience of these nonnormative affiliations.

Poetry eventually became Villa's genre of choice, and this preference (and his tendency toward innovation and abstraction) would eventually influence his slip into obscurity within Asian American literary studies. As other scholars have noted, the Asian American literary canon featured primarily prose fiction as its mainstays (even Bulosan and Santos, who published early on as poets, are remembered today for their fiction).²⁰ And although Villa maintained that this poetics had nothing to do with "the Filipino," his formally innovative work nevertheless countered popular modes of viewing Filipina/o bodies and their interactions with others.

Felicidad Ocampo and Transpacific Feminism

In contrast to Villa's interest in experimental forms of poetry and prose, Felicidad Ocampo worked with the more conventional format of popular

romance. Ocampo, in ways similar to her contemporary Onoto Watanna (Winnifred Eaton), used the romance form to construct highly unconventional female characters. The title of Ocampo's novel *The Brown Maiden* and the text's representation of a mixed-race marriage are critical, given shifting racial classification systems in the United States and a cultural moment in which there was great attention to whether or not Filipinos were "yellow" or "brown." Citizenship cases and immigration laws had already begun to alter categories that linked race and nation. The Immigration Act of 1924, though it limited immigration from southern and eastern Europe, specifically restricted Asians. The 1920s was also a period during which Filipinos "aggressively challenged anti-miscegenation statutes, both through litigation and through collective protest," especially in California.²¹ A series of municipal and state court cases centered on the legality of marriages between Filipinos and women classified as whites. To answer this question, the courts had to determine (or, in many cases, redefine) racial discourse. As Rick Baldoz, Rhacel Parreñas, and Linda España Maram have argued, the courts consulted racial classification systems that referred to skin color and ethnology because the case for intermarriage depended upon whether or not Filipinos' should be classified as Mongolian (or "yellow" and therefore ineligible to marry whites) or "Malay" (or "brown"). After the California State Court of Appeals ruled in *Roldan v. Los Angeles County and the State of California* (1933) that Filipinos were exempt from the intermarriage ban, lawmakers in California quickly responded by prohibiting intermarriage between whites and Malays.²²

Juridical decisions that regulated interracial intimacy spoke to the prominence of constructions of Filipino men as dangerously hypersexual. These forms of Filipino masculinity corresponded with new versions of femininity. At this time, popular print discourse in the Philippines described Filipina women as dramatically affected by their contact with the West through the public educational system, transnational experience abroad, or by their exposure to alternate forms of femininity in various manifestations of popular culture. Filipinas were earning degrees, changing their public interactions with men and women, altering their dress, and entering the work force in a wide variety of careers. The new Filipina soon became an iconic figure in the Philippines. Her future was tied to the outcome of the national suffrage movement and to the Philippines' evolving independence movements.

Ocampo's treatment of women was also influenced by global women's suffrage. Developments in early Filipina and Filipino literature coincided with the rise of women's movements in the United States and the Philippines, and with the emergence of modern girls and new women across the globe.²³ The

issue of women's rights did not always translate into cross-racial or transnational coalition. In the United States, white women suffragists were not necessarily convinced that Filipinos and Filipinas should gain more freedom than American women.²⁴ Across the Pacific, suffrage directly intersected with the Philippines' campaign for independence. In the 1930s, legislators in the Philippines questioned whether or not they should include the women's vote in the new commonwealth constitution (they would eventually transfer the responsibility of the decision to a nationwide plebiscite that occurred a few years later; Filipinas gained the right to vote in 1937).²⁵

Ocampo's use of popular romance tropes maneuvers in and out of this transpacific context. Her contemporaries criticized her writing, but these instabilities are rooted in the uncertain terrain of representing race and gender in the United States and the Philippines.²⁶ In *The Brown Maiden*, she limns this discourse through her protagonist Carmen and her exceptional status as an elite (underscored in the novel's final moments by her decision to marry a "brown" doctor and return with him to the Philippines). The characters who admire Carmen frequently mention that she is not like other Filipinos because she is from an upper-class family. Finally, though the novel's title and many of the characters often call her the "Brown Maiden," Ocampo makes Carmen's body legible as a romance heroine through its whiteness. The narrator describes her – especially in emotionally affective moments of tragedy or difficulty – as appearing white.

Ocampo's portrayal of new women and modern girls, however, is far from idealized. In most of her novels, women face significant challenges in their chosen careers. Her U.S.-based romances zero in on the hardships of working-class women of color, who emerge as emotionally scarred and sometimes physically damaged from their lives. Although these characters may initially view life in the city, their professions, and their education with excitement, they all eventually recognize that this life, despite its benefits, is also filled with difficulty and anxiety. Ocampo's romances ultimately work against their idealized endings, which feature her heroines' eventual acceptance of marriage, and she leaves the future of the new Filipina and her counterparts as unresolved.

Filipino Nationalism and the Migrant Community: *Bulosan's America Is in the Heart*

While Villa turns to experimental poetics and Ocampo to the popular romance in their negotiations of how Filipino and Filipina bodies are read by

a U.S. public, Carlos Bulosan offers an alternate model in his realist, autobiographical novel *America Is in the Heart* (1946), now the most recognizable text that treats the experience of the Filipino migrant community. Though he produced slim volumes of poetry and a popular collection of short stories (*The Laughter of My Father*) before the war, Bulosan secured his place in the Asian American canon with *America*, which tracks the narrator's migration from the Philippines to the United States, his work as a laborer, his brutal experiences with racism, and the development of his activist, socialist consciousness.

America Is in the Heart deserves recognition not only as an important work of literature, but also for its significance in the Asian American cultural nationalist movement. The book has taken on a life of its own. It "has been taught in Asian American studies and US literature and history courses, adapted for performances by Filipino community theater groups, and excerpted in labor union publications."²⁷ Scholars have maintained that it is not surprising that *America* was immediately recognized given the context of the 1970s emergence of Asian American studies. Bulosan's politics of antiracism and cross-class coalition were in alignment with the objectives of cultural nationalism. The novel is set in California, where much of the initial energies of the movement were concentrated, and Bulosan underscores the difficulties of migrant labor in the United States and the protagonist's commitment to activist struggle. Moreover, the book privileges acts of writing and reading, for through the study of literature Carlos becomes fully aware of race and class oppression, and the text early on ties the literary to a "vision of a better life" (57).

Though Bulosan's text ends in the United States, roughly a third of the novel is set in the Philippines, which E. San Juan Jr. observes is a "substantive" though often underacknowledged component of *America*.²⁸ The novel argues that the workings of U.S. racism are inextricable from the occupation of the Philippines. Despite Carlos's presumed embrace of America and faith in the promise of "its glowing reality" (326), the novel's closing lines are quite ambiguous, and they are undermined by the sustained critique of the United States throughout the book. For Bulosan, though an ideal of "America" may exist, it is in name only, as the America that he lives in makes it a "crime to be a Filipino" (121).

To counter the experience of exile and racist violence, Carlos turns to white and working-class women in the United States, and to a community of men. Feminist and queer studies scholars have complicated the novel's representation of migrant masculinity through attention to these gendered and sexed dynamics. Melinda de Jesús, Rachel Lee, Kandice Chuh, and Martin Joseph

Ponce underscore that the development of Bulosan's activist consciousness is linked to the importance of bonds between men. These networks cross the boundaries of class and race within a context that persistently labeled the Filipino body as dangerously hypersexualized.²⁹

Bulosan's frequent return to the memory of the Philippines in the novel also has implications for the text's representations of women. In a foundational analysis of *America's* treatment of female characters, Elaine Kim contends that Bulosan idealizes white women as symbolic of "the contradiction between what is brutal in America and what is kind and beautiful," although she also notes that "no one knows better than Bulosan that he cannot write realistic women."³⁰ Women in both the Philippines and the United States have this iconic status. Throughout the novel, Carlos recalls the haunting memory of his Filipina mother "in bold outline. Raising her dark hands, she wept without moving her eyes; without moving her lips, she cried" (89). Although the idealization of the Filipina, "a guiding star, a talisman, a charm that lights us to manhood and decency" (123), is perhaps not surprising within the context of migrant Filipino communities in the United States, at the same time the mournful image is a recurring trope that renders the Filipina mother as perennially suffering and voiceless.³¹

Gendered Nationalisms in Postwar Literature: Bienvenido N. Santos and Yay Panlilio

Bulosan's emphasis on cross-racial and cross-class unity as a means to resist capitalist and racist oppression counters the idealized notion of American and Filipino brotherhood that was so critical during and immediately after the Pacific War (1941–5), when the context for the production of Filipina and Filipino literature in the United States changed dramatically.³² Two events significantly altered media representations of Filipina/os: the bombings of Manila and Pearl Harbor in December 1941 and the "Bataan Death March" of 1942, when Japanese forces captured American and Filipino troops and forced them to travel to a prison camp in the Bataan province. The resulting attention to the "Bataan Brotherhood" recast the earlier familial relationship so critical to benevolent assimilation. Americans and Filipinos were now equals, unified in their joint efforts against Japan. In 1946, the same year that Bulosan published *America Is in the Heart*, the United States finally recognized the Philippines as an independent republic. This recognition was technically a delay; in 1934 provisions for establishing the Philippine commonwealth included a ten-year transition to independence. The Japanese occupation of Manila interrupted

this period and paved the way for the United States to proclaim the liberation of the country that they had occupied for more than five decades.

Yet as Bienvenido N. Santos's short stories and Yay Panlilio's *The Crucible: An Autobiography of "Colonel Yay"* (1950) illustrate, Filipina- and Filipino-authored literature explicitly worked against these benevolent representations. Santos and Panlilio also highlight the gendered and classed dimensions of forming national communities in the postwar era. For Filipina/os in the United States, the outbreak of the war led to new forms of exile and alienation abroad. Santos, for example, was separated from his wife and family at home in the Philippines when the war began, and he was unable to return home. This experience shaped much of his life and work, and he often described himself and his writing as marked by loneliness and displacement, produced by a lifetime of transnational experiences.

Santos is best known in the United States for his collection of short stories, *Scent of Apples*, though many of these stories were published earlier in the Philippines under the title *You Lovely People* (1955). During the war, he participated in a public relations venture to educate Americans about the far-off lands where their citizens had been deployed. He wrote articles and toured the country giving lectures about the Philippines. This experience became the basis for stories like "Scent of Apples." Though he was already a well-known writer in the Philippines when *Scent* was published, he earned critical acclaim in the United States with the publication of this collection. Many of these stories explore class divisions in the Filipina/o community. In "Scent of Apples," Celestino Fabia, "'just a Filipino farmer,'" drives miles to see the narrator speak in Kalamazoo, Michigan.³³ When the lecture concludes, the older, world-worn Fabia asks a question that makes the youthful narrator pause: "Are our Filipino women the same like they were twenty years ago?" (181). This query illuminates the class differences between the two men: Fabia works on an apple farm while the narrator is a "first class Filipino" (184). The narrator's cautious answer reflects his desire to protect the older man, and "certain ideals, certain beliefs, even illusions peculiar to the exile" (181). He answers that Filipinas, have, in fact, changed only "on the outside," for "inside" (the narrator here points to his heart) they are the same, "God-fearing, faithful, modest, and nice" (182, orig. emphasis).

This exchange regarding the Filipina's heart is the core of *Scent of Apples* and the earlier *You Lovely People*. While the narrator sympathizes deeply with Fabia, and travels with him to the farm to meet his white wife and son, the Filipinas of these short stories consistently refuse to maintain these cross-class connections. Instead, Santos's Filipinas are heartless, cruel, and

dismissive in the company of laboring or working-class men, who, like Fabia, instead turn to white women for comfort and care. The elite Filipina thus poses a significant threat to the national community in the United States. Though she may evoke the taste of coconut milk and scent of camia flowers, she fails to empathetically care for her countrymen. Santos's stories recognize the Filipino laborers' desire to reify women as symbols of home as a survival strategy. He underscores, however, that Filipinas cannot fit within such idealized representations. This awareness is symbolized by Fabia's cherished photo of a woman in traditional Filipina dress, her face blurred and indistinct. Nevertheless, despite this awareness, the stories ultimately suggest that the elite Filipino, like the narrator of "Scent," must heal the rifts caused by the Filipina's failure in – or rejection of – the role of maintaining the national community abroad.

Yay Panlilio's *The Crucible: An Autobiography of Colonel Yay* presents an alternate version of Filipina nationalism that explicitly counters representations of women as icons of the nation or as victims of the war. The celebrated discourse of brotherhood and the narrative of liberation were shadowed by tensions over the recognition of Filipino veterans and their promised compensation packages. Panlilio draws attention to these injustices in her memoir *The Crucible: An Autobiography of Colonel Yay* (1950). During the war, Filipino and Filipina guerrillas were critical to the resistance against Japan. Many of these guerrilla troops worked with the U.S. military, with assurances of eventual compensation and benefits. After the war ended, veterans and their families were excluded from official compensation and benefits.

Incensed by the treatment of her guerrilla comrades, Panlilio published *The Crucible* as an appeal for the cause of veterans' rights and as a plea to the American public for wider recognition of the guerrillas. But the text is also a feminist treatise on the behalf of Filipinas' essential contributions to resistance. *The Crucible* is Panlilio's first-person account of her involvement with the movement and her vexed romance with one of its leaders, Marcos "Marking" Agustin. In representing her experience as Colonel Yay, Panlilio employs tropes of domesticity and motherhood and becomes, in her terms, guerrilla wife and mother. These forms of femininity revise wartime notions of brotherhood in two ways. First, they counter the emphasis on male contributions to the war and critique the presumptions of equality and the family at the heart of the metaphor. Panlilio underscores throughout her text that relations between the two countries are not that of a happy, loving family but rather are fraught by the continued lack of recognition of Filipina/o resistance. This oversight, she contends, has material consequences. Second, Panlilio's

revision of domestic tropes resists the frequent characterization of Filipinas as the war's victims, for the vilification of the Japanese frequently depended upon references to raped, violated, or suffering women. Yet Panlilio's guerrilla domesticity is also importantly far from perfect, especially in her recounting of her violent relationship with Marking. She persistently battles the conflation of patriarchal and martial hierarchies as his "guerrilla wife," and though she often wins their partnership explodes into emotional and even physical violence.

Unfortunately, Panlilio's appeal for recognition would go unanswered. Filipino veterans continued their long campaign for recognition for roughly six decades. In 2009 the U.S. government finally offered compensation. As part of the economic stimulus plan, Filipino veterans received a lump sum payment of \$15,000; those who were not citizens received \$9,000. Unfortunately, by this time, the majority of the claimants who would have been eligible were already dead, and the memory of their contributions to the war would be replaced by triumphant images of U.S. rescue.

I end with "Scent of Apples" and *The Crucible* because these texts, one canonical and the other recovered, exemplify a number of patterns that are important to Filipina and Filipino American literature: exile and alienation; gendered and classed tensions within the transnational community; iconic representations of male laborers or idealized women; same-sex or nonnormative affiliations; and the use of literary form and narrative strategies in contending with the repercussions of empire, racism in the United States, and the popular circulation of Filipina and Filipino bodies. As we have seen, though works like Bulosan's and Santos's would end up dominating the field, these texts must be read in conversation with those produced by Filipina authors, and within the context of shifts in Filipina femininity at home and abroad. We might then reread the importance of Fabia's photograph, for though he cherishes the Filipina woman of the past, the blurred photo also underscores the ways in which these women authors resist their construction as iconic symbols of the nation. Although the archive would similarly render Filipinas as ghostly, isolated, and voiceless mothers, sisters, and wives, authors such as Ocampo and Panlilio complicate these representations and are critical to the development of early-twentieth-century Filipina/o literature. Their texts are both precedent and counterpart to a long tradition of Filipina feminist literature, exemplified by the later work of writers such as Jessica Hagedorn, Cecilia Manguerra Brainard, Evelina Galang, Barbara Jane Reyes, and Gina Apostol. Their presence also reminds us that our study of this literary history is only just beginning.

Notes

- 1 Felicidad Ocampo, *The Lonesome Cabin* (Boston: Meador, 1931).
- 2 Felicidad Ocampo, *The Brown Maiden* (Boston: Meador, 1932), 35.
- 3 Carlos Bulosan, *America Is in the Heart* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973) and Bienvenido N. Santos, *Scent of Apples: A Collection of Stories* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1979). Further references in parentheses in the text.
- 4 *Transpacific* underscores multivalent interactions in the Pacific region; for my use of this term, see Denise Cruz, *Transpacific Femininities: The Making of the Modern Filipina* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).
- 5 Oscar Peñaranda, Serafin Syquia, and Sam Tagatac, "An Introduction to Filipino-American Literature," in *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*, ed. Jeffrey Paul Chan et al. (1974; repr. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1975), 50. For an incisive discussion of this introduction, see Martin Joseph Ponce, *Beyond the Nation: Diasporic Filipino Literature and Queer Reading* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 5–6.
- 6 See Epifanio San Juan Jr., *From Exile to Diaspora: Versions of the Filipino Experience in the United States* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998); Victor Bascara, *Model Minority Imperialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Allan Punzalan Isaac, *American Tropics: Articulating Filipino America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Ponce, *Beyond the Nation*; Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns, *Puro Arte: Filipinos on the Stages of Empire* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).
- 7 See Carlos Bulosan, *The Cry and the Dedication*, edited and introduction by Epifanio San Juan Jr. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995) and *All the Conspirators*, introduction by Caroline S. Hau and Benedict Anderson (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005). See also Angeles Monrayo, *Tomorrow's Memories: A Diary, 1924–1928* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003); Yay Panlilio, *The Crucible: An Autobiography of Colonel Yay, Filipina American Guerrilla* (1950; repr. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009); and Evangeline Canonizado Buell, *Twenty-Five Chickens and a Pig for a Bride: Growing Up in a Filipino Immigrant Family* (San Francisco: T'boli Publishing, 2006).
- 8 Bienvenido N. Santos, "So Many Things," *You Lovely People* (1955; repr. Manila: Bookmark, 1991), 141–50, 149.
- 9 See Catherine Ceniza Choy, "A Filipino Woman in America: The Life and Work of Encarnación Alzona," *Genre* 39.3 (Fall 2006): 127–40; Dorothy Cordova, "Voices From the Past: Why They Came," in *Making Waves: An Anthology of Writings by and About Asian American Women*, ed. Asian Women United of California (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 42–9; and Dawn Bohulano Mabalon, *Little Manila Is in the Heart: the Making of the Filipina/o American Community in Stockton, California* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).
- 10 See Neferti Tadiar, *Fantasy-Production: Sexual Economies and Other Philippine Consequences for the New World Order* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004); Vicente Rafael, *White Love and Other Events in Filipino History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Augusto Fauni Espiritu, *Five Faces of Exile: The Nation and Filipino American Intellectuals* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005); Antonio Manuud, ed., *Brown Heritage: Essays on Philippine Cultural Tradition and Literature* (Quezon City,

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- 31 The weeping woman-as-nation importantly recalls another Filipino-authored nationalist novel, Jose Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere* (1887) and its tragic Maria Clara, a figure of iconic femininity that is frequently referred to in Filipina/o literature.
- 32 These shifts led to the publication of memoirs about American and Filipino experiences during the war, such as Yay Panlilio's *The Crucible*, work by Carlos Bulosan (*America Is in the Heart* and *The Laughter of My Father*), and Carlos Romulo's books.
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Chinatown Life as Contested Terrain: H. T. Tsiang, Jade Snow Wong, and C. Y. Lee

PATRICIA P. CHU

Chinatown: Insiders' Views, 1937–1957

The two best-known Chinese American depictions of San Francisco's Chinatown from the 1950s are Jade Snow Wong's memoir *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1950) and C. Y. Lee's novel *The Flower Drum Song* (1957). These are worth comparing with H. T. Tsiang's *And China Has Hands* (1937), which depicts the life of a Chinatown bachelor in New York City in the 1930s, when most Chinese in this country were male laborers living as bachelors. Tsiang is arguably the first Chinese to publish an English-language novel in America. To our knowledge, *And China Has Hands*, his third novel, is the first Chinese-authored novel in English set in Chinatown, and the first published by a commercial press.¹ *Fifth Chinese Daughter* was chosen as a Book of the Month, published in England and Germany, and translated into numerous Asian languages by the State Department, which sent Wong on a speaking tour through Asia in 1953. Reprinted in 1989, the book is still taught and discussed on college campuses. *The Flower Drum Song*, also one of the first Chinese American novels, was a *New York Times* bestseller. Richard Rodgers, Oscar Hammerstein II, and Joseph Fields adapted the novel for Broadway, premiering in New York in 1958; their version inspired the 1961 Hollywood film that now remains the best-known version of the story. Finally, the libretto was completely rewritten, with only the songs unchanged, by David Henry Hwang (Los Angeles premier, 2001; New York, 2002; publication, 2003). Tsiang's novel, which fell out of favor during World War II and the Cold War era, has recently enjoyed renewed critical interest.²

Wong, the American-born daughter of a factory owner, was the least experienced, most conventional writer of the three, but arguably the most influential. Because there were few intact families in Chinatown during the era of Chinese exclusion (1882–1943, discussed in the following text), her depiction of

her close, hardworking family contested stereotypes of Chinatown as a crime- and vice-ridden bachelor community. Her text has been both valued and criticized as the very model of a disparaged genre, the ethnographic memoir that serves as a tour guide, commodifying Chinese culture for mainstream consumption. Others have defended *Daughter* for its double voice, through which Wong portrays her parents as both highly traditional immigrants and flexible, Westernized entrepreneurs.³

A native of Hunan province who combined a wartime education in China with graduate studies at Columbia University and Yale Drama School, C. Y. (Chin Yang) Lee mixed tragedy with sweetness and light in his first novel. Romantic love and intergenerational struggle, brightened with witty dialogue and constant action, are tinged with darker references to exclusion, unemployment, suicide, and deportation. In their musical adaptations, Rogers, Hammerstein, and Fields took a softer, crowd-pleasing approach. Racially progressive for their time, these versions shattered casting conventions and stereotypes, providing pointedly American musical comedy roles for companies of Asian American actors. Yet this prominent novel was omitted from early Asian American literature anthologies and dismissed as unsuccessful satire by influential critic Elaine H. Kim. Today, its tragicomic tone may be interpreted as conveying the ambivalent condition of racial melancholia – a lingering state of mourning for a lost homeland, induced by insurmountable structural obstacles to belonging in the new land, and the specters of poverty and deportation. Finally, David Henry Hwang's adaptation has been defended as a flawed but powerful "counterstory" that challenges the musical's legally problematic portrayals of Chinese. Using Chinese American drama as a metaphor for cultural adaptation, Hwang asks how viewers and readers can distinguish a cultural invention designed to please outsiders from a genuinely new form of ethnic American culture.

For answer, we turn to H. T. Tsiang's proletarian novel *And China Has Hands*. Set in New York's Chinatown in the 1930s, Tsiang's text depicts the coming to consciousness of a Chinese laundry owner who seeks economic security and the love of a mixed-race heroine, Pearl Chang. Vivid and succinct, *China* conveys the income, costs, workplace, abject work conditions, social isolation, and economic vulnerability of Wong Wan-Lee, a solo Chinese hand laundry operator. It dryly exposes both the social gelding of the Chinese worker by exclusionary laws, and the discrimination faced by Pearl as a mixed-race woman in Chinatown. With its unique voice, its critique of racial inequality and capitalism, and its clarion call to class struggle, *And China Has Hands* is a worthy American rejoinder to Lao She's classic proletarian novel of 1937, *Rickshaw* (*Lo t'o Hsiang Tzu*).⁴

Notwithstanding their fluctuating reputations and the difficulties of combating Asian invisibility within the American literary tradition, each text offers a complex, vivid, distinctive vision of Chinatown. Together, they establish the social and literary heterogeneity within the contested terrains of Chinatown and its literature.

The Problem of *Fifth Chinese Daughter*

After publishing essays in *Common Ground* (1945, 1948), Jade Snow Wong published *Fifth Chinese Daughter* in 1950, when she was twenty-eight.⁵ The memoir, which ends with the establishment of her pottery business in 1945, invites competing readings. It presents Wong as a protofeminist rebel claiming individual rights in contrast to her parents' Confucian family values (64, 103–11, 125–30). Conversely, it also shows that her family combines Chinese customs and a Confucian family hierarchy with the Methodist faith, the Protestant work ethic, and "American" ingenuity (48–60, 71–3, 238). While portraying her parents as remote, frugal, strict, and biased toward sons, she also depicts them as model Americans: hardworking, self-supporting, resourceful small business operators, devoted parents, and community leaders. Written in the author's twenties, the memoir portrays Wong's parents as traditional Chinese demanding diligence, obedience, self-sacrifice, and loyalty to family and community. Jade Snow both exemplifies and challenges these values when she leaves her home to work for white families, attend Mills College, work in a Navy shipyard, and open her own business in Chinatown. Wong reconciles her need for individual expression and recognition with her loyalty to family and community by winning white recognition for her writing and her pottery, but establishing her pottery business within Chinatown. Studded with references to obstacles overcome and honors achieved (134, 180, 195), the book explicitly refutes claims that whites would not hire Chinese, citing many instances of whites' acceptance and support for Wong. Yet it also makes clear that her career was exceptional: few of her Chinatown classmates entered college. Hence, the book is both a model minority success story, and a more complex community portrait.

The text is driven by Wong's endless labors, which are inseparable from her achievements. Indeed, literary critic Christine So divides Wong's career into five stages: "labor for her family, for other (white) families, for a college, for the nation, and finally, for herself as a writer and potter."⁶ Since a Chinese daughter's labor (seen as payment toward an unpayable debt) is never her own, Jade Snow gains more pay, personal recognition, and cultural capital

(understanding of white culture) when she begins working for whites. She prospers by learning to use not only her cultural capital as a Mills graduate, but also her capital as an ethnic Chinese. Jade Snow Wong is the pseudonym of Constance Wong Ong, born on January 21, 1922, the sixth of nine children. Her father, a garment factory owner, minister, and community leader in San Francisco's Chinatown, instructed her in Chinese language and culture, and sent her to Chinese school for nine years, but his plan to prepare her for study and work in China was rendered impractical by Japan's invasion of China (95). At eleven, Jade Snow assumed about half her family's housework so that her mother could earn more money; at twelve she was also given a Sunday School class to teach. When Wong's parents declined to send her to college, she worked her way through San Francisco Junior College and Mills College, graduating in 1942, then crossed racial boundaries and showcased her patriotism as a secretary at the wartime Navy shipyards (188–98). Later, she decided to promote intercultural understanding by writing and to support herself by making and selling pottery. She rented a small workspace in the window of an Chinatown shop, wryly illustrated by Katheryn Uhl (Wong 240), where in 1945 she installed herself as a potter, turning heads, attracting enough customers to become a local celebrity and buy “the first postwar automobile” in Chinatown, and winning her father's approval. Wong married Woodrow Ong in 1950; they supported themselves and their four children by making and selling their distinctive pottery and enamelware, and guiding tours to Asia, as depicted in her 1975 memoir *No Chinese Stranger*.⁷ That memoir also gives a more complete portrait of her father within a transpacific context, including anti-Chinese discrimination in the United States and abroad. After a distinguished career as a writer and ceramicist, Wong died of cancer in 2006.

In the 1970s, ethnic studies scholars found fault with Wong for valuing white standards and ideals too highly over those of her parents, and relying on her publisher's and instructor's editing to publish her first book. Elaine H. Kim criticized Wong even for valuing Chinese culture, claiming this was a “defensive reaction” that represented “withdrawal from conflict rather than militant challenge.” Noting that Wong's response to her dilemma as an American-born Chinese was to work harder, to seek comfort in certain aspects of her Chinese identity, and to refuse to admit the existence of discrimination, Kim deemed such strategies dated and “rather pathetic,” despite Wong's success and the fact that she had pointedly reviewed the history of Chinese exclusion in America in her second book. Literary critic Xiao-huang Yin, better attuned to the conditions faced by Chinese American writers since the 1850s, was more sympathetic, noting the Wongs' extreme poverty, the generous support of

Jade Snow's white benefactors and mentors, and her text's progressiveness for its time. Cultural critic Christina Klein suggested that "in the 1940s and 1950s it was precisely the dual identity – the foreignness – of Chinese Americans that gave them value as Americans" because they better supported the vision of America as a diverse nation and inclusive of minorities if they were fully assimilated. Along with C. Y. Lee, Wong was one of a group of ethnic writers and artists whose efforts to promote America's influence abroad were valued, so long as they asserted and embodied the presence of opportunity for minorities.⁸

In short, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* has been the most enduring of the early works by Asian American writers acting as cultural tour guides.⁹ Over decades, readers have responded to Wong's lively voice, her vivid depictions of Chinatown family life, and the familiar plot of the ethnic daughter who gains agency by leaving home. Wong's text gains additional historical resonance when juxtaposed with Tsiang's depiction of the typical life of a depression-era Chinatown bachelor, and with the works of Maxine Hong Kingston, whom she inspired. It's most powerful, however, when one compares Jade Snow's life with the buried lives of other Chinese women in her text, including Jade Snow's older sisters (84, 112, 137–45), her Chinatown classmates (154), the kitchen staff at Mills College (157), and Jade Snow's mother, who works night and day to support her family, who was left alone at age eleven to care for a small herd of pigs, who misses Jade Snow's graduation due to pregnancy, whose own education is never mentioned, and who expresses and receives little affection from her children (30–1, 179–81, 184–5). As in Mary Antin's classic immigration memoir *The Promised Land*, the daughter's admiration for her resourceful father and ambivalent love for her mother are sure to provoke discussion.¹⁰

C. Y. Lee: Portrait of the Artist

C. Y. Lee was one of 3,900 Chinese studying in the United States who remained after the Chinese revolution of 1949. His novel reflects the combination of intellectual privilege with exposure to adversity in China and Chinatown, where he resided and reported on daily life for a decade. Born in Hunan province in 1917, the youngest of eleven children, he studied comparative literature in Xinan (Southwest) University, Yunnan province, served as secretary to a local chieftain at the Yunnan-Burma border, and came to the United States for graduate study in 1943. Hoping to write for the Chinese film industry, he earned an MFA for playwrighting at Yale in 1947. Discouraged from returning home and from writing for the American stage, he moved to San Francisco

and worked as a journalist for *Chinese World*, then *Young China*, and taught Chinese at the Monterey Army Language School. Expecting to be deported after overstaying his student visa, he instead won a literary prize in 1949 that enabled him to stay, apply for permanent residence, and write his first novel *The Flower Drum Song*. When it was accepted for publication, he found work with the United States Information Agency (USIA), a U.S. agency devoted to public diplomacy. He remained at USIA's Radio Free Asia until the novel became a bestseller, and Rodgers and Hammerstein optioned the book. His ten novels in English have been published in Chinese, along with a short story collection; he has published two memoirs as well.¹¹

Though Lee's playwrighting career was aborted by the lack of opportunity for Asians in the theater, he was well mentored at Yale and highly successful as a creative writer in the United States. Struggling for publication in the shadows of the Cold War, Lee chose not to make his first novel overtly political. Yet the novel registers the Chinese community's deep anxieties about persistent exclusion and marginalization, and more than one character may be described as having the race-based dejection described by literary critic Anne Anlin Cheng as "racial melancholia."¹²

Male Melancholia and Contested Terrain

Set in San Francisco around 1953–4, the novel focuses on Wang Chi-Yang, a recent immigrant who mourns and defends his memories of his late wife while worrying about his rapidly assimilating sons, Wang Ta and Wang San.¹³ In a story driven by Ta's search for a wife, Lee soft pedals the financial and immigration worries that troubled most Chinese immigrants in the 1950s, after decades of war and instability at home, but displaces these fears onto Wang's neurotic attachment to his cash savings and his fears of robbery. Substituting memories of his wife, symbolized by a gold clock, for engagement with modern-day life, he is tutored in adjusting to change by his sister-in-law, Madame Tang, and Ta, who recommends a Western-trained doctor. Wang melancholically resists change, tending his chronic cough with herbal remedies, and accusing Ta's fiancée, May Li, of stealing the clock, until his son walks out on him. The novel ends bittersweetly, with Wang's belated "conversions," as he repents of driving away Ta and May Li, looks forward to reconciling with them, and turns his back on his only friend, an herb doctor, to consult a modern Chinese American doctor (221).

The novel presents the concerns of generations of Chinese bachelors: gaining legal immigration status, finding work, and finding wives. A State

Department website explains that from 1882 through 1943, Congress banned the immigration of Chinese laborers, exempting students, merchants, and diplomats. In 1924, they and most other Asians were specifically barred from entry based on their categorization as “aliens ineligible for US citizenship.” When Congress nominally legalized Chinese immigration in 1943 to sweeten U.S. relations with China, they only authorized the naturalization of Chinese already present in the United States. As “aliens ineligible for citizenship,” most Chinese from abroad still could not enter until the Immigration Act of 1924 was repealed in 1965. Nonetheless, Congress also set a stingy entry quota of 105 per year for Chinese, and decreed it would apply to anyone with 50 percent or more of Chinese ancestry, regardless of their nationality, thus barring ethnic Chinese from entering under the more generous quotas allotted to other nations.¹⁴ After 1949, Chinese were liable to be questioned, arrested, and persecuted for allegedly pro-Communist activities, including sending money to family members in China.

In the novel, Wang Ta, the first son, has found no white-collar job in the booming postwar economy despite his circa 1953 American BA in economics and has been forced by his father to turn down his only offer, a dishwashing job in Chinatown. He says he’s chosen medical school to put off job hunting for as long as possible. The dialogue implies, but does not say outright, that whites are not hiring Chinese. If Ta were real, we might also suppose he sought to avoid deportation as a Chinese “laborer” by renewing his student exemption. Because Lee leaves such details tacit, the father looks snobbish, and the son, frivolous, but the reader is not directly confronted with the racist immigration laws and anti-Communist witch hunts of the 1950s. Instead, Lee moves briskly into innocuous ground, Ta’s romantic problems, but inflects these with the historically accurate problem of the shortage of women for these men to date. From 1882 through 1943, Chinese laborers residing in the United States could not bring their wives here; exclusion laws severely restricted single Chinese women’s immigration; and miscegenation laws in thirty-eight states, including California, made interracial marriage rare and difficult. Thus, Ta’s romantic problems are not merely personal; they exemplify his community’s struggle to survive.

Lee’s nuanced treatment of food, dialects, space, and Chinese politics marks Chinatown and its representations as contested terrain. Food and dialect references emphasize the characters’ heterogeneity while moving the plot along. While Madam Tang studies English and the U.S. Constitution, backward-looking Wang Chi-Yang insists on speaking Hunanese. Linda Tung toys with suitors in Cantonese, Mandarin, and Shanghai dialects. By parading

home-cooked meals from Northern, Central, and Southern China, Helen expresses her eagerness to bed Wang Ta. And May and Old Man Li signal dignified desperation by ordering chow mein and taro pudding, a paupers' New Year banquet. (Lee identifies the dialects, but pens the "Chinese" dialogue in saucy American English: "How do you expect Wang San to earn a living if he can only recite Confucius in the future?" Madam Tang asks Wang Chi-yang.) Chinatown's spaces are described from multiple perspectives: Grant Avenue is described as a colorful street for tourists, a "showcase" and "livelihood" for its workers, and a simulacrum of Canton for Chinese refugees (132, 1). A restaurant used as a setting for murders by white mystery writers reminds Ta's friend Chang of his village home (111). And when discussing a shooting, Madam Tang reverses the ethnographic gaze, insisting that such crimes are common in "foreign society," but rare in Chinatown (122–3).

Lee's largely apolitical characters share memories and a tacit awareness of recent events in China, but Lee portrays the Wangs, the Lis, and Chinatown as anti-Communist. Though Wang Chi-yang (like Lee) hails from Mao Tse-tung's home province, he has left China rather than don a Lenin uniform, and dislikes Communism "only" because it has "destroyed Chinese traditions and turned the Chinese social order upside down" (5, 7). Wang Ta's friend dissuades Ta from going back by insisting that life there would go against his honest nature, and that "Red China," "an inflated bullfrog," may go to war (103–4). On Chinese New Year, Chinatown's display the flag of the ousted Republic of China (ROC), which the narrator seemingly calls the "Stars and Stripes, the red and blue and bright sun flag of Nationalist China" (despite the flag's lack of stripes), symbolically aligning Chinatown and the United States with its historical ally, the ROC (132).¹⁵ And May Li's father, originally from Peking, worked for a retired American, General White, who was "driven out" of China to Taiwan by the Communists before emigrating with the Lis to the States. By contrast, the film avoids Chinese politics and gives Ta a depoliticized choice between the assimilated, nearly white character of Linda and the firmly alien character of May Li.

The Haunting

Rodgers and Hammerstein emphasize Ta's choice between the assimilated Chinese American dancer, Linda Low, and May Li, in whom traditional values are conflated with illegal immigration status. (In the novel, May Li and her father are legal immigrants.) But Lee gives Wang Ta a third choice, that of Helen Chao. By comparing Lee's treatment of Helen and Wang Chi-yang

with that of David Henry Hwang, we can compare how the two authors portray the theme of racial melancholia, as ailment and antidote.

Lee's Helen is a forty-one-year-old seamstress whom Ta sees platonically. Her tragic presence poses a problem for the novel's supposedly lighthearted tone. Helen seduces Ta with elaborate cooking and wine, and then entertains him twice a week, but he breaks off the affair, explaining that he cannot love her, and avoids her. His rejection seems particularly cruel after she undergoes a painful skin treatment to ameliorate her pockmarked skin, literalizing the trope of losing face. When Helen is found dead, having committed suicide, Ta is stricken and remorseful until he meets May Li.

Clearly, Helen and Linda (both immigrants in the novel) are meant to serve merely as foils in Ta's romantic education; yet Helen's suicide haunts Ta's subsequent courtship of May Li. As a poor, plain, Chinese immigrant, Helen embodies racial melancholia, a state of mourning induced by her indefinite marginalization in America. Rather than confront this despair directly, the filmmakers convert Helen into a poised, assimilated Chinese American beauty who sings a song of romantic renunciation, "Love, Look Away," performs a cryptic dance sequence suggesting sexual betrayal and drowning, and vanishes from the film. As Anne Anlin Cheng suggests, Helen is the Asian American hybrid who gracefully combines Chinese and American qualities, but as she "cannot be looked at, cannot remain in representation," her marital ineligibility in the film implies the filmmakers' reluctance to admit such persons into their vision of the nation, giving symbolic inclusion only to Chinese women who either assimilate to a fault or remain completely foreign.¹⁶

Countering Rodgers and Hammerstein: Fierce Remembrance in Hwang's *Flower Drum Song*

Though the Broadway adaptation was deemed "a respectable success," it's rarely revived. The film version, nominated for five Oscars, remains the best-known version of the story. Though fondly remembered by David Henry Hwang, it has been portrayed as a studio confection that has displeased scholars and activists since the mid-1960s.¹⁷ Hwang's version, which opened on Broadway in 2002 and ran for five months, has been described both as an enjoyable mess and as a serious counterstory meant to correct the film's objectionable narrative of Chinese Americans.

Critical legal scholar Ryan Tacorda notes that Rodgers and Hammerstein reconceptualize Mei Li and her father as illegal immigrants. In the film's

climactic scene, Mei Li releases herself from an arranged marriage contract by revealing her illegal immigration status. The Wangs accept her as a bride, however, because their own immigration status is not clear. The contract is arranged by two characters created by Rodgers and Hammerstein, Madame Fong and her son Sammy, a nightclub owner. Finally, Rodgers and Hammerstein invent the “Celestial Gardens,” a nightclub where Asians perform Orientalist acts for white tourists. For Tacorda, the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical normalizes pernicious stereotypes of Chinese as perennial foreigners who eat bizarre foods, arrive illegally, commodify Chinese women, and peddle ersatz Chinese culture (cultural “chop suey”) to whites; moreover, it fails to clarify the little-known legal history of Asian American exclusion, marriage obstruction, segregation, and job discrimination faced by Chinese Americans. Hwang’s attempt to redress these problems with the “counterstory” of his revision is admirable, but only partially successful, for Hwang is unable to overcome the “cultural DNA” of the musical’s songs or adequately critique the novel’s sexist and elitist attitudes.¹⁸

However, a full reading of the play demands attention to its central theater metaphor. Hwang made the Chinatown nightclub the site of the father-son struggle over assimilation, represented by a choice between a moribund Peking opera tradition cherished by Wang Chi-yang (recast as a former opera star) and a more commercial nightclub act advocated by Wang Ta (now an actor). In doing so, Hwang develops a metaphor introduced in his early play, *Dance and the Railroad*, which explored how honoring Chinese culture could help railroad workers resist and transcend degrading conditions in America.¹⁹ As in the film, Linda (now a stripper) and Wu Mei-li (now the heir to her father’s Peking opera roots, his political and cultural integrity, and his flower drum) represent Ta’s options; but, following Lee’s lead, Hwang’s Mei-li is more assertive and culturally adaptive than the film’s. Though attracted to Linda, Ta chooses Mei-li as his muse and partner; with her help, he brings a revitalized, Americanized opera tradition back to his father’s club.

Hwang restores the “bittersweet tone” of Lee’s novel by replacing Helen Chao with an unskilled immigrant, Chao, who persuades Mei-li to pawn her flower drum and depart with him to Hong Kong. At the docks, Chao and Mei-li perform “Love, Look Away,” explicitly reframed as a song about the racial melancholia of disappointed migrants turning away from America. The ambivalent longing of the song is dramatized when Mei-li, heartened by Ta’s arrival with the drum, decides to stay, and Chao, to depart (87–91).

More jarring is Wang Chi-yang’s transfiguration from a fastidious Peking opera director to a shameless proponent of Orientalist nightclub

entertainment. Wang signals his conversion by performing “Vagabond Sailor,” in which he, the sailor, recalls his conquests of “European” women (Asian Americans in whiteface). Wang renames the theater “Club Chop Suey” and dresses showgirls in giant takeout cartons, exchanging dignity and neglect for exuberance and commercial success. Whereas Rodgers and Hammerstein introduced Sammy Fong, the nightclub owner, as a separate character, Hwang requires the dignified Wang to *become* the brash Fong. An early, darker version of Hwang’s play, in which Wang/Fong suffers a nervous breakdown over the difficulty of reconciling these opposing worldviews, was reportedly cut to accommodate Rodgers and Hammerstein’s optimistic songs (Lewis 156–7). Instead, Hwang has Chin, an old family friend, explain to the mystified Ta that his dad’s weird new act has given Wang Chi-yang a rare “second chance”: “he’s finally begun to let go . . . of his memory of your mother. . . . Of course, he used to have better taste” (72). If Wang’s attachment to the opera signified a melancholic attachment to his wife and their past, then singing “Vagabond Sailor” represents a parodic *departure* from such mourning, a “cure” marked with comic ambivalence.

Scholars conceptualize racial melancholia not as pathology, but as a mechanism for coping with the burdens of perennial outsider status: for the minority subject, fierce remembrance of lives past can counter the threat of cultural erasure. Ta, therefore, must remedy his father’s “racial dementia” by moving in the opposite direction: reclaiming the drum, Mei-li, the Chinese opera, and all they represent by revitalizing the Peking opera in San Francisco with new, American elements. Thus, the play’s resolution and its central conceit look back to his earlier play, *Dance and the Railroad*, and also enter into dialogue with Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston about the place of tradition and innovation in Chinese American culture. Kingston addressed that debate in a novel that reimagined Wu Ch’eng-en’s *Journey to the West* as the key to a wandering actor’s reinvention of Chinese American theater in twentieth-century San Francisco: *Tripmaster Monkey*. Hwang slyly signals this lineage in his new name for Wu Mei-li’s departed father, Wang’s oldest friend from opera school: Wu Ch’eng-en.²⁰

H. T. Tsiang’s *And China Has Hands*

Hsi-Tseng Tsiang (1899–1971) – also spelled Chiang or Jiang Xizeng – is arguably the first Chinese American novelist to publish in English. Poet, novelist, playwright, actor, and activist, Tsiang combined formal experimentation and “strategic appropriation” from both Chinese and English literature with

a lifelong commitment to left-wing activism. Unfortunately, this combination placed him at the mercy of changing literary politics, and his writings were largely forgotten after the 1930s, until rediscovered and republished by critics and scholars beginning in 1982 (Tsiang, *Hands*, 14).

Born on May 3, 1899 in Jiangsu province and orphaned in 1912, Tsiang grew up in dire poverty but won a scholarship to Nanjing's Southeastern University. Graduating in 1925, he worked briefly as secretary for Sun Yat-sen. When Sun died in 1925, his Nationalist (Kuomintang or KMT) party splintered. Observing the rise of the conservative wing under Chiang Kai-shek, Tsiang, a left-wing party member, fled to the United States and enrolled at Stanford in 1926, entering as a student under the National Origins Act of 1924. While at Stanford, Tsiang founded the radical bilingual periodical *Chinese Guide in America*, but his activities protesting Chiang Kai-shek's persecution of communists within the KMT got him into trouble.

Relocating to New York, Tsiang studied at Columbia University, where he took up poetry as a form of revolutionary protest, self-publishing *Poems of the Chinese Revolution* (1928), which argued that the struggle for communism in China was related to a broader "world-revolution." In 1931, he self-published *China Red*, an epistolary novel about a young woman in China and her fiancé in America whose divergent responses to Chinese politics posed challenges for readers. His second self-published novel, *The Hanging on Union Square: An American Epic* (1935), depicted the transformation of an impoverished eccentric named Mr. Nut, whose encounters with other allegorically named characters raised his class consciousness. Recently reissued, *Hanging* has been described as "a darkly satirical text" that "dramatizes Mr. Nut's descent into the hell of Depression-era Manhattan and his Christ-like emergence in the end to defeat Mr. System."²¹

Tsiang's third novel, *And China Has Hands*, indicts American capitalism and Japanese imperialism. *China* draws upon the Chinese ghost story and the American proletarian novel to tell the love story of Wong Wan-Lee, an immigrant Chinese laundry worker, and Pearl Chang, an aspiring actress from the South who is half Chinese American and half African American. At the novel's outset, Wong hopes to grow rich by living frugally and working hard in the hand laundry business, while Pearl aspires to be a movie star. After reading a 1766 ghost story collection, Pu Songling's *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, in which humans long for ghost lovers, Wong dreams of Pearl as an angel (F. Cheung 64–5). In addition to her femininity, Wong prizes Pearl's native understanding of American culture and how to deal with Americans. Pearl, a Southerner, thinks of the Chinese as merchants who can afford to marry and

raise families; in the American South, Chinese are slightly more privileged and middle class than blacks. By coming north, she hopes to learn more about her father's culture, circumvent antiblack racism, and enter the middle class by claiming Chinese status. At the height of their romance, he gives her a short version of Chinese history, depicting himself as the son of emperors, and she calls him "my dear Prince," but before they can become intimate, she is repulsed by his insensitive lovemaking. Wong's story, which also includes a futile attempt to date a dance-hall hostess, a mental review of the drawbacks of long-distance marriage, and a trip to a Chinese prostitute who is saving tips to buy her freedom, illustrates the difficulties created by the rarity of eligible Chinese women in the exclusion era, and Wong's resulting ignorance; Pearl's illustrates her pain at encountering Chinese racism and sexism. (Tsiang, *China*, 78, 92–105). (The 1930 census listed a 42:1 male-female ratio among single Chinese in New York.) Deftly dramatizing complex social problems, the novel also demonstrates how obstacles particular to Chinese laundrymen compound the harsh competition faced by hand laundry operators during the Depression. Despite fifteen-hour workdays, Wong is driven into bankruptcy by a legal debt incurred in defending his U.S. citizenship, mechanized competition, racial slander, robbery, official extortion, a loan shark, and a desperate visit to a gambling den.²² Meanwhile, Pearl gives up her dramatic aspirations and takes a well-paid job as a Chinatown restaurant waitress, but the owner fires her upon discovering her mixed-race heritage. However, she finds work at a cafeteria whose owner thinks she looks Chinese enough to fool white customers. In the depressed economy of the mid-thirties, the mechanized cafeterias are driving Chinese restaurants out of business, just as mechanized white-owned laundries put pressure on the Chinese hand laundries of this period. Hence, Pearl again meets Wong, who has lost his business and joined the cafeteria staff. When the staff protests their working conditions, the lovers meet on the picket line. Tracing their turn from bourgeois illusions to working-class consciousness, the novel fits the definition of the proletarian Bildungsroman, in which one or more protagonists acquire militant or revolutionary class consciousness, and the protagonist encounters multiple instances of abuse or exploitation that expose "the devastating . . . effects of capitalism" on the workers (F. Cheung 65).

In a final twist, Wong is shot by a Japanese agent in retaliation for his prominence in a demonstration by thousands of Chinese and American New Yorkers against Japanese imperialism. Sorrowfully attended by Pearl, Wong improvises a poem prophesying the unification of China by the "Chinese Reds" and their ultimate victory over the Japanese invaders. Japanese forces had

conquered much of northern China by 1937, and the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance of New York had worked successfully to gain sympathy for China, but the Western powers hesitated to intervene, in part because Japan had become an important trade partner (F. Cheung 65). However, the surprise ending illustrates Tsiang's idea that individuals of different races must join together to oppose both capitalist exploitation and imperialism.

Tsiang published one more work, the play *China Marches On* (1938), which combined references to the woman warrior, Hua Mulan, with a true story about a Chinese regiment defending a tactically important warehouse in Shanghai (F. Cheung 66). Tsiang was imprisoned on Ellis Island in 1939 and 1941, ostensibly because his student exemption had lapsed. When released the second time, he enrolled at the New School for Social Science Research, where he studied acting and political theater. In 1943, the year that Chinese exclusion nominally ended, Tsiang began his career as a professional actor (Tsiang, *Hanging*, 220–1). His most prolific years as a writer were over, and his publications would be invisible to C.Y. Lee, who arrived at Columbia that year, and Jade Snow Wong, who would document a very different Chinatown experience. However, Tsiang appeared in many films, continued to perform and produce his own plays, and lived until 1971.

Notes

- 1 The trope of Chinatown as discursively “contested terrain” comes from K. Scott Wong, “Chinatown: Conflicting Images, Contested Terrain,” *MELUS* 20 (1995): 3–15. Jade Snow Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1989 [1950]). C. Y. Lee, *The Flower Drum Song* (New York: Penguin, 2002 [1957]). H. T. Tsiang, *And China Has Hands*, ed. Floyd Cheung (New York: Ironweed Press, 2003 [1937]). Further references to Wong, Lee, and Tsiang in parenthesis in the text. As Floyd Cheung notes, Hsi-tseng Tsiang was Tsiang's official name, and he consistently published under the name of H. T. Tsiang. His surname is romanized as “Chiang” by the Library of Congress, and his full name would be rendered as Xizeng Jiang in pinyin. Given space constraints, we offer these claims primarily as invitations to further discussion. For complex reasons, it appears that all of Tsiang's Chinese predecessors published short stories or nonfiction, and Tsiang was obliged to self-publish his first two novels. *And China Has Hands*, his third novel, is the first to be published by a commercial publisher. To consider Tsiang as the first Chinese (or Chinese American) novelist in English, see, e.g., King-Kok Cheung and Stan Yogi, *Asian American Literature: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1988), 27–53. H. T. Tsiang's novels *China Red* (1931) and *The Hanging on Union Square* (1935) are the earliest novels published by a Chinese among Cheung and Yogi's 592 listings for “Chinese American Prose” in English. See also Xiao-huang Yin, *Chinese American Literature since the 1850s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000). Winnifred Eaton, a prolific novelist of half-Chinese descent who is

- listed as Chinese American by Cheung and Yogi, certainly preceded Tsiang. Despite her mother's ethnicity, however, scholars typically do not view her as legally or culturally Chinese, in contrast to Tsiang. As Dominika Ferens explains, Eaton grew up in an Anglicized Canadian household, socializing with no Chinese but her culturally Anglicized mother, and her primarily Japanese-themed work was mediated by Orientalist ethnography. See Dominika Ferens, *Edith and Winnifred Eaton: Chinatown Missions and Japanese Romances* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 5.
- 2 Oscar Hammerstein and Joseph Fields, *Flower Drum Song: A Musical Play* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1959). *Flower Drum Song*, directed by Henry Koster (1961; Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 2006 [1961]), DVD. David Henry Hwang, *Flower Drum Song*, (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2003). Further references in parenthesis in the text.
- 3 See Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, "Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour?" in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: A Casebook*, ed. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 29–51; and Kathleen Low Swee Yin and Kristoffer F. Paulson, "The Divided Voice of Chinese-American Narration: Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter*," *MELUS* 91 (Spring 1982): 53–9.
- 4 Lao She, *Rickshaw: The novel Lo-t'o Hsiang Tzu*, trans. by Jean M. James (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1979 [1937]).
- 5 Jade Snow Wong, "Daddy," *Common Ground* (December 1945): 25–9. Jade Snow Wong, "The Sanctum of Harmonious Spring," *Common Ground* (December 1948): 84–91. "Daddy" includes material not included in the memoir. Thanks to Cathy Eisenhower for locating these articles and verifying the publication date of the memoir. Jade Snow Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*.
- 6 Christine So, *Economic Citizens: A Narrative of Asian American Visibility* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007), 41–8.
- 7 Jade Snow Wong, *No Chinese Stranger* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).
- 8 Elaine H. Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 70–1. Jade Snow Wong, *Stranger*, 10–19, 43–4. Xiao-huang Yin, *Chinese American Literature*, 135–49. Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945–1961* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2003), 240–3.
- 9 For an influential discussion of the genre, see S. C. Wong, "Autobiography," 29–51.
- 10 Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1912).
- 11 On Lee's publications, see *Greenwood Encyclopedia of Asian American Literature*, ed. Guiyou Huang (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2008).
- 12 Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
- 13 Internal references to Madame Tang's naturalization, the Cold War, Red China, and the flight of General White to Taiwan place the novel after 1949 but before its publication date of 1957. See Lee, *Flower Drum Song*, 29–30, 103–4, 133. Within this frame, references to the lunar "Year of the Horse" (1954–5) place the lunar New Year scenes on and around February 3, 1954, placing the novel in the years 1953–4 (125, 150).
- 14 U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, "Milestones: 1937–1945. Repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act, 1943," last modified December 3, 2010, accessed

- July 1, 2014. Online resource: <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1937-1945>. See also Ryan Tacorda, "Constructing Chinese American Identity through Film and Theatre: *Flower Drum Song* as Ingroup Narrative and as Counterstory," *UCLA Asian Pacific America Law Journal* 118 (2004): 131–2.
- 15 Lee may have meant to write, "The Stars and Stripes, *and* the red and blue and bright sun flag of China," but in either case the flags are closely associated.
 - 16 Cheng, *Melancholy*, 62.
 - 17 Klein, *Cold War Orientalism*, 230. David H. Lewis, *Flower Drum Songs: The Story of Two Musicals* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2006).
 - 18 Tacorda, "Constructing Chinese American Identity," 118–42. In discussing the musicals, Tacorda does not mention Fields. For a historical note on Chinese American nightclubs, see *ibid.*, 130, 156. For more on Chinese exclusion laws, see *ibid.*, 131–3.
 - 19 David Henry Hwang, *Dance and the Railroad*, in *Trying to Find Chinatown: The Selected Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2000), 53–88.
 - 20 Maxine Hong Kingston, *Tripmaster Monkey* (New York: Vintage-Random, 1990). Wu Ch'eng-en, *Journey to the West*, trans. and ed. by Anthony C. Yu (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977–83). For more on Chin, Kingston, Chinese American appropriations, and *Tripmaster Monkey*, see Patricia P. Chu, *Assimilating Asian: Gendered Strategies of Authorship in Asian Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).
 - 21 Floyd Cheung, "H. T. Tsiang: Literary Innovator and Activist," *Asian American Literature: Discourses and Pedagogies* 2 (2011): 59, 62–3. Subsequent references in parenthesis in the text. H. T. Tsiang, *The Hanging on Union Square: An American Epic* (Los Angeles and New York: Kaya Press, 2013).
 - 22 Compare Peter Kwong, *Chinatown, NY: Labor and Politics, 1930–1950* (New York: New Press, 2011).

Coded Critiques: Japanese American Incarceration Literature

TRAISE YAMAMOTO

Nearly seventy years after the closing of the ten concentration camps in which 120,000 Japanese and Japanese Americans were incarcerated in the wake of the December 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor, there is far from full agreement amongst Japanese Americans about the long-term significance of the internment. Indeed, issues of significance subtend even matters of terminology. Although *internment* is often used colloquially and interchangeably with *incarceration*, the latter is more legally and historically accurate. However, many former incarcerateds prefer the more familiar and less legalistic term *internment* because it downplays negative carceral connotations. Long-standing conflicts include those between veterans and draft resisters, between those who cleaved ever closer to American patriotism and those who applied for repatriation to Japan, and between those who supported the Japanese American Citizens League and those who felt the organization had worked in collusion with the U.S. government. These tensions still reverberate in a community whose watershed historical moment was the unprecedented and unjustified incarceration of a group of primarily American citizens suspected of treason on the basis of race. Such ongoing conflicts and contestations within the Japanese American community attest to the continued significance of the internment. Yet well more than a half-century later, the imprisonment of Nikkei in concentration camps from 1942 to 1945 remains relatively unknown or only vaguely known to the majority of non-Japanese Americans.¹

Much of the social narrative surrounding Japanese American responses to the imprisonment has focused on cultural silence, as many former internees responded to their internment with a sense of shame and thus downplayed or refused to speak about it.² This narrative of silence, however, has been oversimplified as one characterizing the Nisei (second-generation, American-born) generation, while the push toward speech and redress has been identified with Sanseis (third-generation, American-born).

Yet there is a rich history of incarceration literature produced by Niseis, some of which appeared very shortly after the end of the war. Although a number of works have appeared since the 1980s, written by both Niseis and Sanseis, this discussion will focus on selected representative texts written by Niseis and published up through the 1970s.³ Ranging from memoirs and fiction to poetry and sociological studies, this body of work represents varied and deeply felt responses that, despite their surface tone, are often coded critiques of the Japanese American incarceration. This productive discrepancy between text and subtext might usefully be understood as a strategic parallel to the often coded or euphemistic terms deployed by the U.S. government during the war. Official terms such as *evacuation*, *relocation centers*, *assembly centers*, and *nonaliens* were part of a narrative that obscured the facts of the exclusion, forced removal, detention, and incarceration of American citizens.⁴ Even the widely used term *internment* amongst Japanese Americans is considered by many to be somewhat problematic, as it formally refers to the legal detention of enemy aliens. The Japanese American National Museum and the Densho Project, for instance, both urge the use of “World War II Incarceration.” They also prefer “concentration camp,” “prison camp,” or “incarceration camp” to the more colloquially used “internment camp.” Far from being insignificant parsings of nomenclature, such discussions register the ways in which euphemistic language participated in justifying what remains a singular event in the history of the United States.

Coded Language

Three of the most foundational texts about the incarceration appeared within eight years of its official end: Miné Okubo’s *Citizen 13660* (1946), Hisaye Yamamoto’s “The Legend of Miss Sasagawara” (1950), and Monica Sone’s *Nisei Daughter* (1953). Notable in all three texts is an overt description or narrative of camp life and a covert critique of the racism and failure of an espoused U.S. democracy. Scholars have referred to this use of subtextual strategy as “muting” or “masking.”⁵ Given the pervasive anti-Japanese climate in the years directly following the war, published accounts of the internment experience during this period tend toward a seemingly straightforward description of events, avoiding overtly negative political assessments or accusations of racism. However, one would be mistaken to read these texts as mere accounts of an unfortunate occurrence, for these narratives have a didactic purpose and are driven by a moral imperative. As writer Yoshiko Uchida explains in her 1982 memoir, “I wrote [my book] for

all Americans, with the hope that through knowledge of the past, they will never allow another group of people in America to be sent into a desert exile ever again.”⁶ This same purpose is implicitly evident in earlier published works. As such, “the avoidance of overt conflict with those readers whom these authors desire to educate necessitates the nonthreatening presentation” of the internment experience.⁷

Many of the authors under discussion deploy a coded discourse that contrasts with the surface narrative. Much of this impulse is a consequence of the pervasive censoring of letters and camp publications. As scholar Stan Yogi observes, “Because camp publications were censored by government authorities, overt criticism of the internment was rare. Consequently, writers had to mask their criticisms.”⁸ Artist and writer Miné Okubo, whose *Citizen 13660* appeared in 1946, had been heavily involved with the daily *Topaz Times*, about which she notes, “All news passed the censorship of the administration staff.”⁹ Interesting here is her doubled meaning: everything had to pass through the censors; everything that was news, what people needed to know, got past the censors. What Okubo had learned working on the *Topaz* newspaper informs her book, an illustrated narrative of her experience of incarceration at “the Central Utah Relocation Project” (122). Okubo’s narrative is straightforward and, as Vivian Fumiko Chen notes, “avoids language that openly expresses bitterness or anger.”¹⁰ *Citizen 13660* is narrated in first person, and all of the illustrations include a figure that is understood to represent Okubo. It is through this figure that Okubo provides a striking contrast to the narrative’s “understated” and “noninflammatory” tone.¹¹ In the narrative, Okubo states that she decided early on “to keep a record of camp life in sketches and drawings,” which she refers to as “documentary sketches” (53, 206). These sketches provide a counternarrative to official records and euphemized representations of life in the camps. Okubo presents herself as both witness – as when she inserts herself into the barrack’s bachelor quarters – and subject, often depicting herself looking directly at the viewer. In one particularly powerful drawing that accompanies a description of the constant surveillance of the internees by white camp police, Okubo’s figure surreptitiously keeps an eye on a policeman crouching outside a barrack, within which two men play cards. The complex circuit of gazes is underscored by Okubo’s composition, in which the peephole in the barrack wall occupies the center of the picture plane, calling attention to the act of looking and highlighting the difference between surveillance and witnessing (60).

Okubo also employs a visual lexicon that both documents and subtly comments on the dehumanizing conditions to which incarcerated were subjected.

For instance, the diamond cross-hatching and sloped roof of a chicken coop is echoed in other drawings by the horizontal cross-hatching and sloped roofs of the camp barracks (195, 113, 123). Even more explicit is Okubo's rendering of a pen in which hogs were kept to provide meat for the camp. Okubo's figure stands on the lowest of the three-rung wooden fence; on the page directly opposite, Okubo leans against the three-rung wooden railing of a truck in which a group of internees is being transported to help harvest vegetables. These parallels visually reinforce the subhuman conditions that began when Japanese Americans were first housed in horse stalls before the completion of the more permanent camps.

Okubo's visual strategies offer both resistance to official narratives and evaluate the conditions and effects of incarceration. Because her critique is coded or masked within a seemingly neutral narrative, contemporary reviews overall lauded *Citizen 13660* as "objective" and "without bias."¹² However, "unlike the disinterested reporting of a participant observer trained in the social sciences," writes Lynne Horiuchi, Okubo's "self-presentation and observations of behavior convey physical and cognitive information that is emotionally loaded."¹³ Okubo registers this emotion using irony in the very title of her book, juxtaposing "citizen" with the family number issued to her. Each term reciprocally undermines and calls into question the other, reminding us that neither – perhaps especially the first – is neutral.¹⁴

Masking in Nisei Autobiography

The wry and understated irony deployed in Okubo's work was frequently characterized by reviewers as "humorous," the appreciation for which seems to have been directly related to the "absence" of bitterness in her account.¹⁵ Similar assessments were also bestowed upon Monica Sone's *Nisei Daughter*, which appeared in 1953. Reviewers referred to the charm, humor, and fairness of Sone's "unaffected, honest little story."¹⁶ In her foundational study of Asian American literature, Elaine H. Kim argues that second-generation Asian American autobiographers positioned themselves as a "living bridge" between two cultures, with what was Asian perceived by the dominant culture to represent absolute and unassimilable difference. As such, Kim continues, "Until recently, published Asian American writers presented the Asian American experience lightly and euphemistically, even humorously, without significant expression of concern about the manifestations of social injustice."¹⁷

In the immediate aftermath of the war, Sone's narrative not only seeks to create this bridge but also to affirm the Americanness of Japanese Americans

to a white American audience. The narrative traces her childhood and family life several years prior to the war, follows through incarceration, and ends with Sone's departure from Minidoka, just a few years before her book was published. Despite the wealth of narrative detail, which serves to "humanize" Kazuko Itoi (Sone's given name) and her family, *Nisei Daughter* is, like other Nisei women's autobiographies, "frustratingly *unautobiographical*, not given to personal disclosure or passages of intimate self-reflection. . . . Tonally, they are the equivalent of pleasant acquaintance."¹⁸ Shirley Geok-lin Lim writes that "although the autobiographical impulse seeks to express a unique life, almost in contradiction, [Japanese American] life stories repeat a common plot of race difference and conflict with white American hegemony. They therefore come to represent something other, both more communal and more abstract than the particular life."¹⁹ Sone's purpose, like Okubo's, is to record and serve as witness to what happened to Nikkeis during the war. As such, her experience is meant to be paradigmatic, rather than personally introspective and particular in the manner one might expect in an autobiography, and her narrative tone is carefully calibrated.

Yet beneath the mask of a "cheerful, enthusiastic, even breezy" narration,²⁰ Sone lodges a perspicacious critique of U.S. ideologies of democratic equality. *Nisei Daughter* opens with a scene of racialized self-division, in which, at age six, she learns she is "a Japanese" and declares that this is "like being born with two heads. It sounded freakish and a lot of trouble."²¹ While the theme of conflicted identity runs throughout Sone's text – lending itself to a reductive dual-identity model that would read any resolution as choosing one identity over and against the other – the narrative dramatizes, rather than accedes to, the racist logic that requires racial and cultural excess to be disavowed. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Sone writes that "an old wound opened up again, and I found myself thinking inwardly from my Japanese blood, the blood of an enemy" (145). The "wound" that reopens is presumably the one that opened when Sone's parents informed her that she would be attending Japanese school in addition to regular public school (3–5). The scene, which closes with Kazuko's hyperbolic response – she refuses to eat and sobs, "letting great big tears splash down into my bowl of rice and tea" (5) – must be read in light of Sone's later statement that this moment is one of wounding. Stephen H. Sumida argues that this scene is "a recreation through Sone's adult hindsight . . . a carefully selected memory. It reflects some thirty years – and not merely six – of the author's experience and view of her life."²² Sumida's reading recognizes the discursive layering and textual masking operative in much of *Nisei Daughter*, suggesting the much more pointed critique it embeds.

We might further consider that Sone's wording, "an old wound opened up *again*" (emphasis added), points beyond this childhood memory and provides a context for considering what it means that a six-year-old was already well aware of the negative consequences of being "a Japanese." This shifts the interpretive resonances of this scene from the comically humorous to something much more painful.

Reading *Nisei Daughter's* opening scene not as the originary site of wounding but as yet another repetition of the wound's reopening suggests that there is an unnamed, unnarrated referent underlying the text. At the close of a prewar chapter that recounts how the family was unable to rent a house due to racist exclusion, Sone writes, "We had often felt despair and wondered if we must beat our heads against the wall of prejudice all our lives. In the privacy of our hearts, we had raged, we had cried out against the injustices, but in the end, we had swallowed our pride and learned to endure" (124). Still later, after detailed chapters about life in the Minidoka camp, Sone refers to having felt "riotous emotion," "a knot of anger," "burning thoughts," and "quiet hysteria" while incarcerated, yet none of these emotions or the events that caused them are described. Traise Yamamoto notes that "these breaks in the text, or rather these cracks in the mask, suggest a whole other self but give us no access to it. Sone . . . uses the language of a private self masked by endurance."²³ While these structuring absences might seem to signal capitulation to white readers' sensitivities, we might consider that they rather evidence Sone's resistance to laying bare her private sense of self in the largely unsympathetic political and sociological marketplace of 1953. Sumida suggests a gendered reading, wherein "by choosing neither to fit nor directly to oppose dominant ideologies, some women and . . . so-called minorities in America find ways to operate within the blind spots of hegemonic groups with interesting, sometimes deeply troublesome, and sometimes remarkably popular (though often poorly understood) results."²⁴ While less willing to read Sone in a resistant mode, Yoonmee Chang avers that *Nisei Daughter*, "while not offering outright critique, enables critique to emerge."²⁵ Divergent as assessments of Sone's purposes may be, the very terms and scale of dissent in present-day scholarship attest to the complexity and careful narrative layering of *Nisei* accounts of their imprisonment.

Elliptical Narration

The first widely published work of fiction dealing with the incarceration is Hisaye Yamamoto's short story "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara" (1950).²⁶

Much has been written about Yamamoto's style, which has been variously referred to as "oblique,"²⁷ "elliptical,"²⁸ and "muted," employing "coding strategies"²⁹ and "buried plots,"³⁰ and exploiting the disjunction between manifest and latent plots. "Legend" presents a particularly opaque surface that leads the reader away from its underpinning political critique. King-Kok Cheung argues, "The degree to which the political subtext is muted may have something to do with its original publication in *Kenyon Review* in 1950, only five years after the war ended."³¹ The story takes place at Poston and is narrated by Kiku, a teenager who, like many of Yamamoto's narrators, is unreliable to the extent that she is too young to understand fully what she describes. But unlike other stories in which a youthful narrator inadvertently reveals a subordinated narrative, "Legend" purposefully deploys a blithely unaware teenager who, like the other internees, gossips, conjectures and is fascinated by the title character in order both to draw and obscure a subtle parallel with the rumors, assumptions, and suspicions that resulted in the wartime incarceration of Japanese Americans.

The center of the camp's attention is a thirty-nine-year-old former dancer, Mari Sasagawara, whose sartorial flair quickly establishes her as a spectacle and site of speculation. At first, Miss Sasagawara is read as off-putting, distant, and unfriendly, but as the story progresses she is judged to be hostile, unstable, and, finally, "crazy." After earlier having been sent to a sanatorium and seemingly having recovered her senses, Miss Sasagawara's behavior deteriorates, and she is ultimately sent to a state asylum in California. Several years later, Kiku discovers a published poem by Miss Sasagawara, which is both "erratically brilliant" and "tantalizingly obscure" (32). The poem registers the speaker's anguish during the internment, which is described as "sheer imprisonment" but which another – presumably Mari's father, Rev. Sasagawara – experiences as enabling him to feel "free for the first time." Kiku's account of the poem, and Yamamoto's story, ends with the poet declaring "she would describe this man's devotion as a sort of madness, the monstrous sort which, pure of itself, might possibly bring troublous, scented scenes to recur in the other's sleep" (33). Completely taken up with his intent to contemplate "highest" things, this man fails to see the speaker's isolation or hear her "anguished silence" (33).

Yamamoto deftly weaves together the themes of suspicion, intent, rumor, and madness in a story that seems on the surface to be about one woman's inability to adjust to what everyone else seems to take as a matter of course – so much so that Kiku and her friend Elsie, still during wartime, refer to "the good old days" (30) when they were working together in the

camp mess hall and hospital. In the grip of clueless youth and pipe dreams of “preferably handsome, preferably rich” future husbands, the girls are implicitly contrasted with the more mature and accomplished Mari, who has traveled the world as a professional ballet dancer (21). In contrast to those around her, Mari Sasagawara is clearly unhappy about being incarcerated and displeased with the constant lack of privacy. Her frustration is from the start minimized as attributable to an artistic temperament or suspected as evidence of craziness when she accuses her barrack neighbors of spying on her (20–1).

Throughout the story, however, Yamamoto gives us key information about the conditions in camp: Poston is a “place of wind, sand, and heat” that houses “15,000 or so people” (20, 22) in a camp whose hospital is staffed by an elderly retired doctor and a medical student months shy of his degree, and which is more than a mile away and across an open canal from some areas. Dust storms dirty the barracks, and a barrack “apartment” for two people is likened to “a cubicle” (25). Meals are taken in mess halls, where apple wrappers are used for napkins. A Nisei ambulance driver thrills at having been selected to drive to the hospital, even if “under escort,” because it means a few hours of freedom on the outside (27). Given such conditions, Miss Sasagawara’s response is much more understandable, even, Yamamoto suggests, more appropriate than that of her fellow incarcerated.

However, while “Legend” may cast a dubious eye on the seeming normalization of camp conditions, its careful control of gazes points toward parallel rings of surveillance: Mari Sasagawara is watched by the camp community, much as they collectively are surveilled by the camp guards and, by extension, the U.S. government and population. Miss Sasagawara is subject to such constant, even obsessive, scrutiny, extending into the supposed privacy of a postmidnight shower, that even her absences are noted (22). Cheung writes that Miss Sasagawara’s “hypersensitivity to being spied upon not only mirrors the wartime hysteria and paranoia of the white majority but also reflects back on the plight of her own ethnic group.”³² Much of the power of Yamamoto’s narrative derives from how she links surveillance to rumor and assumption; that is, how she articulates the connection between what is seen and how what is seen is then collectively interpreted. Mari Sasagawara is not only scrutinized: she is interpreted, often third-hand, through gossip and hearsay, much as Japanese Americans were in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor. In one of the most striking images in the narrative, Mari sits in the camp hospital, a small crowd having gathered to get a firsthand glimpse of the proceedings. Kiku, having somewhat belatedly

joined in, can only “peer at” Miss Sasagawara “through the triangular peephole created by someone’s hand on hip” (26). Yamamoto here calls attention to how Kiku’s, and by extension the reader’s, vision is mediated by and through others. The filter through which Miss Sasagawara is judged to be unstable emblemizes the filter through which Japanese Americans were judged to be suspect and traitorous. Yamamoto’s coded narrative thus throws into question the extent to which Miss Sasagawara is “mad.” While the story’s close, narrated through Kiku’s narration of Mari’s poem, seems to indict Reverend Sasagawara’s detachment as “a sort of madness,” what resonantly hovers is Yamamoto’s indictment of the collective madness driving the wartime hysteria of the internment.

Refusing Coding and the Mask: *No-No Boy*

The preceding discussion has focused on encoded, masked, and muted narratives, strategies for registering resistance and critique in a postwar period whose national sentiment was not sympathetic to the injustices of Japanese American incarceration. However, there is an important dissenting text in this same period, the power and value of which was not recognized for some twenty years after its original publication. This refers to John Okada’s now celebrated novel *No-No Boy*. Published in 1957, eleven years after Miné Okubo’s *Citizen 13660*, seven years after Hisaye Yamamoto’s “The Legend of Miss Sasagawara,” and four years after Monica Sone’s *Nisei Daughter*, Okada’s novel was direct in its depiction of the cost wrought by the war, incarceration, and reductive, racist notions of citizenship. Lawson Fusao Inada writes that the novel went “practically unnoticed,” and the initial printing of 1,500 copies barely sold.³³ However, *No-No Boy* was not simply passively unnoticed: it was actively spurned. The original publisher, Charles E. Tuttle Co., noted with surprise, “At the time we published it, the very people whom we thought would be enthusiastic about it, mainly the Japanese-American community in the US, were not only disinterested but actually rejected the book.”³⁴ At his death in 1971, Okada “died in obscurity believing that Asian America had rejected his work.”³⁵

The reception of Okada’s novel both highlights the necessity for the coding strategies discussed in the preceding text and throws into relief Okada’s refusal to employ similar strategies. Jinqi Ling suggests that because Okada sought “to convey the severity of the World War II rupture in Japanese American life within the limited cultural space allowed for Asian American literary expression” of the 1950s, he strategically chose the novel form.

Through “a fictional hero, Okada could not only speak the ideologically unspeakable but also keep his narrative position usefully ambiguous.”³⁶ Whereas the texts discussed previously evoke issues of reception by white America, *No-No Boy* also involves issues of representativeness and the precarious position Japanese Americans felt they were in more than a decade after the war’s end. Okada’s text displays none of Okubo’s wry humor, Sone’s amusing anecdotes, or Yamamoto’s understated irony. Instead, he paints a portrait of displacement and division, a community rent over questions of patriotism and loyalty, a family torn apart by war and incarceration, and a protagonist whose frustration and anger are expressed in a series of anguished internal soliloquies. Most significantly, his main character, Ichiro Yamada, has returned home to Seattle after being imprisoned for reluctantly refusing the draft, a refusal his pro-Japan mother sees as proof that he is truly her son. Ichiro’s father, a feminized figure in contrast to the masculinized mother, drinks cheap liquor to dull his pain. Brother Taro, hostile and sullen, joins the Army before completing high school in the belief he can counterbalance the shame of Ichiro’s refusal. Japanese American veterans are depicted as bullies; even the primary veteran character, Kenji, seems ambivalent about his service and symbolically suffers a war wound that is gangrenously destroying his leg and will eventually kill him.

In short, *No-No Boy* does not depict what would later come to be called a “model minority” community. Rather, it dramatizes the incommensurate demands, and the costs, of ethnic citizenship, interrogating the discourse of choice between consent and dissent. According to Kandice Chuh, “the novel indicates that the semblance of choice was a false one to the extent that the available options had already been strictly defined by forces outside of [Ichiro’s] control.”³⁷ Though scholars have come to different conclusions about Okada’s relationship to issues of national identity and assimilation, many agree that the novel registers many of the tensions within Cold War discourse and “reveals as much about the period in which it was published . . . as it does about the one it depicts.”³⁸ That Okada’s novel has prompted such rich critical conversations might be understood to emerge from the contradictions emblemized through his several characters – many of whom are dead by novel’s end – as well as by the enigmatic, ambiguous, and ambivalent image that closes *No-No Boy*. Ichiro walks “in the darkness of the alley,” an image of constriction but also of, an albeit narrow, destination, while “he chased that faint and elusive insinuation of promise as it continued to take shape in mind and in heart” (251). The negative, serpentine resonance of “insinuation,” though “faint and elusive,” while not fully

foreclosing the possibilities of resolution, nevertheless throws the narrow range of possibilities into question.

The 1970s: Incarceration's Afterlife

In 1966, sociologist William Petersen coined the term “model minority” in an article titled “Success Story, Japanese-American Style.”³⁹ Almost a half-century later, despite a large body of scholarship detailing the problematics of the term, model minority discourse continues to be applied to Asian Americans and wielded against other racialized groups (or in Petersen’s terms, “problem minorities”).⁴⁰ The staying power of this term speaks to the dominant social and political investment in assimilationist ideology and the failure to interrogate institutionalized racism.

In the shadow of this Japanese American model minority figure, Daniel I. Okimoto’s *American in Disguise* (1971) and Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston’s *Farewell to Manzanar* (1973) were published, both of which were favorably reviewed in the mainstream press.⁴¹ Far from being harbingers of the arguably more radical writing of Japanese Americans in the 1980s and beyond, however, these texts were, according to Elaine H. Kim, “appropriate to the high demand for timely accounts written by successful minority informants . . . [which could] be regarded as examples for Blacks and other minorities to follow.” Kim further argues that some of the tendencies toward “self-negation” in Sone’s *Nisei Daughter* “had been continuing at an accelerated and relentless pace for twenty years” and results in “the almost complete disappearance of self” in Okimoto and Houston.⁴²

Indeed, the trope of invisibility runs throughout both narratives. Houston writes that in the aftermath of the war, “I would be seen . . . as someone other than American, or perhaps not be seen at all . . . [P]art of me yearned to be invisible. In a way, nothing would have been nicer than for no one to see me” (114). What prevents her invisibility and “thwarts” her efforts “to adopt white American values,” and thus assimilate into white America, is her Japanese face (122). One of the more significant aspects of *Farewell to Manzanar* is how much it focuses on Houston’s father, particularly in terms of his insistence after the war that Jeanne move, behave, and generally comport herself in a Japanese way, rather than like a *hakujin* (white person). He makes it clear she is to date only other Japanese Americans and remains “unforgivably a foreigner” (120, 122, 124–7). Thus, much of the force of the narrative is driven by a privatized story (“my own, my father’s, my family’s”) that diverts attention away from the larger picture of racism and structural inequality (x).

These same forces are evident in Daniel Okimoto's *American in Disguise*, which is a memoir wrapped in a sociopolitical treatise. Okimoto, a political scientist by training, was born in the Santa Anita Assembly Center and was barely two weeks old when his family was transferred to Poston. Okimoto's title resonates with Houston's sense of a Japanese face as a mask beneath which white America cannot see, and his narrative also shows tendencies toward privatization of what are larger social, political, and cultural forces. Similar to Monica Sone's language of feeling like a "two-headed freak,"⁴³ Okimoto attests to a sense of his "racial freakishness" (69). But where Sone describes and stages feelings of shame, both Okimoto's and Houston's texts embody internalized shame and self-division. What is notable about *American in Disguise* is the extent to which Okimoto's divided sense of himself informs a text that offers itself as a narrative of achievement and realization of one who "is able or at best thinks himself able, to deal with a complex heritage with at least a minimum of objective skill" (8).

But whose objectivity? Okimoto references Harry Kitano's 1969 critique of the model minority myth as being "made from a strictly majority point of view" that judges Japanese Americans as "good because they conform – they don't make waves"⁴⁴ and chides Japanese Americans who buy into a "we made it, why can't they?" mentality as "basically immoral" and evidence of "conservatism and political lethargy" (152–3). Yet Okimoto's criticism is limited to Japanese Americans and does not extend into analysis of how a dominant culture that produces a "theory" as immediately popular as the model minority also creates the conditions for an ethnic self-critique that leaves untouched the dominant status quo.

Crucial here is Okimoto's underlying sense that he is "an American in disguise, a creature part of, yet somehow detached from, the mainstream of American society" (5). Tellingly, he privileges interracial marriage – to whites – as "the key to final assimilation," and his narrative concludes with his own marriage to a white American (156). Though Okimoto concludes with the hope that "racial minorities" will one day no longer "feel any less American because of their racial heritage," this hope is predicated on his belief that for his future mixed-race children "half the disguise I have worn will be lost" (206).

If the 1970s are bookended on one end by the model minority myth and ethnic self-negation, the beginnings of woman of color feminism and the assertion of ethnic identity stand at the other. The 1976 publication of Mitsuye Yamada's book of poems, *Camp Notes*, signals a new direction in internment literature, one that neither codes its critique of racism nor seeks to eradicate

racialized difference.⁴⁵ It is important to note, however, that many of the poems in Yamada's volume were written during and immediately after the war, suggesting the existence of a different, more critical voice that the publishing world was not prepared to acknowledge.⁴⁶

While some of the poems in *Camp Notes* share the tonal irony found in Hisaye Yamamoto's writing, they more clearly veer toward sarcasm and are overall pointed and overt in their depiction of the internment. In the condensed brevity of these poems, the words detailing camp life stand out starkly: numbered, fingerprinted, alien registration, FBI, uniformed guard, cage, barbed fence, contraband, soldiers, watchtower, prisons (19–31). Yamada's straightforward language names things as they are and pushes against the deceptive use of language, as in "Evacuation," wherein a photo for which evacuees were told to smile is captioned, "Note smiling faces / a lesson to Tokyo" (13). In "Desert Storm," Yamada more directly, sarcasm dripping from her line breaks, addresses the euphemisms the government deployed to obscure the injustice of Japanese American incarceration: "This was not / im / prison / ment. / This was / re / location" (19).

Mitsuye Yamada, like John Okada, renders clearly legible the realities and consequences of the incarceration, foregoing many of the coding or masking strategies other writers, of necessity and choice, deployed. But discourses of choice – whether of style or strategy – must always circulate with the recognition that writing the interned subject takes place at differing distances from the historical incarceration, as well as from the discourses of self produced by, through, because of, or in spite of internment. *No-No Boy* stands as a paradigmatic example of a text that was written prior to a time and an Asian America that was ready for his characters' complex and unflattering negotiations with citizenship, national identity, and Japanese Americanness. However, scholars should be cautious about overreading contemporary gestures of dissent in texts whose authors dealt with issues of race and nationalism during a historically specific era. While such issues are far from resolved, and while contestations over national belonging, identification, and racialized difference continue to center dominant culture subjects, there are also available frames of analysis and discourses of difference that were not yet articulated in the postwar period. Thus, we should be mindful that the present desire for an overtly resistant subject and recoverable narratives of dissent may make legible coded critiques, as well as place under erasure Nisei voices that register a range of responses outside present analytic frameworks. To recognize fully the rupture and significance of the Japanese American incarceration during World War II, the very contestations that arose during that

time and in the postwar period, many of which still remain unresolved, must fully inform present-day critical hindsight.

Notes

- 1 "Nikkei" denotes persons of Japanese descent, whether Japanese nationals (who were barred from U.S. citizenship) or their American-born children.
- 2 See Elaine Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 137; Mary Matsuda Gruenwald, *Looking Like the Enemy* (Troutdale, OR: NewSage Press, 2005), xi; Brian Komei Dempster, ed., *Making Home From War: Stories of Japanese American Exile and Resettlement* (Berkeley, CA: Heyday, 2011), xxiii–xxiv.
- 3 In the 1980s and after, the effects of the Third World Student Strikes – resulting in the founding of ethnic studies – second- and third-wave feminism, the rescission Executive Order 9066 in 1976, the 1981 congressional hearings that resulted in the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which included a formal apology from the government and monetary redress, and a greater receptivity toward work by writers of color significantly changed the landscape of internment literature.
- 4 At least two-thirds of the 120,000 incarcerated were American citizens.
- 5 See Stephen H. Sumida, "Protest and Accommodation, Self-Satire and Self-Effacement, and Monica Sone's *Nisei Daughter*," in *Multicultural Autobiography: American Lives*, ed. James Robert Payne (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 207–43; Traise Yamamoto, *Masking Selves, Making Subjects: Japanese American Women, Identity, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); and King-Kok Cheung, "Thrice Muted Tale: Interplay of Art and Politics in the Stories of Hisaye Yamamoto," *MELUS* 17.3 (1991–2): 109–25.
- 6 Yoshiko Uchida, *Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese-American Family* (1982; repr., Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1984), 154.
- 7 Yamamoto, *Masking Selves*, 105.
- 8 Stan Yogi, "Japanese American Literature," in *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, ed. King-Kok Cheung (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 133.
- 9 Miné Okubo, *Citizen 13660* (1946; repr., Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1983), 134. Further references in parentheses in the text.
- 10 Vivian Fumiko Chin, "Gestures of Noncompliance: Resisting, Inventing, and Enduring in *Citizen 13660*," in Greg Robinson and Elena Tajima Creef, eds., *Miné Okubo: Following Her Own Road* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 67–81.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 74, 76.
- 12 See Heather Fryer, "Miné Okubo's War" *Citizen 13660's* Attack on Government Propaganda," in Robinson and Creef, *Miné Okubo*, 82–98.
- 13 Lynne Horiuchi, "Miné Okubo's *Citizen 13660* and Her *Trek* Artwork," in *ibid.*, 111–30.
- 14 See Stella Oh's extended discussion on this point in "Paradoxes of Citizenship: Re-Viewing the Japanese American Internment in Miné Okubo's *Citizen 13660*," in *ibid.*, 145–58.
- 15 Fryer, "Miné Okubo's War," 92–5.

- 16 See reviews by the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *New York Herald Tribune*.
- 17 Kim, *Asian American Literature*, 59.
- 18 Yamamoto, *Masking Selves*, 103. See Chapter 3, for an extended discussion of Nisei women's autobiographical writing.
- 19 Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Japanese American Women's Life Stories: Maternality in Monica Sone's *Nisei Daughter* and Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*," *Feminist Studies* 16.2 (Summer 1990): 288–312.
- 20 Anne Rayson, "Beneath the Mask: Autobiographies of Japanese-American Women," *MELUS* 14.1 (1987): 43–57.
- 21 Monica Sone, *Nisei Daughter* (1953; repr., Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1979), 19. Further references in parentheses in the text.
- 22 Sumida, "Protest and Accommodation," 208.
- 23 Yamamoto, *Masking Selves*, 120.
- 24 Sumida, "Protest and Accommodation," 218.
- 25 Yoonmee Chang, *Writing the Ghetto: Class, Authorship, and the Asian American Ethnic Enclave* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 110.
- 26 Hisaye Yamamoto, "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara," 1950, in *Seventeen Syllables and Other Short Stories* (Latham, NY: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1988), 20–33. Further references in parentheses in the text.
- 27 Yogi, "Japanese American Literature," 135.
- 28 King-Kok Cheung, *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 29.
- 29 King-Kok Cheung, "Thrice Muted Tale: Interplay of Art and Politics in Hisaye Yamamoto's 'The Legend of Miss Sasagawara,'" *MELUS* 17.3 (Fall 1991–2): 109–25.
- 30 Stan Yogi, "Legacies Revealed: Uncovering Buried Plots in the Stories of Hisaye Yamamoto," in *Hisaye Yamamoto: "Seventeen Syllables,"* ed. King-Kok Cheung (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 143–60.
- 31 Cheung, *Articulate Silences*, 30.
- 32 Cheung, "Thrice Muted Tale," 118.
- 33 Lawson Fusao Inada, "Introduction," *No-No Boy* (1957; 1976; repr., Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1979), iii–vi.
- 34 Jeffery Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Hsu Wong, "Aiiieeeee! Revisited: Preface to the Mentor Edition," in Jeffery Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Hsu Wong, eds., *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (1974; repr., New York: Signet, 1991), xxxix.
- 35 Okada, *No-No Boy*, back cover.
- 36 Jinqi Ling, "Race, Power, and Cultural Politics in John Okada's *No-No Boy*," *American Literature* 67.2 (June 1995): 359–81.
- 37 Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 71.
- 38 Daniel Y. Kim, "Once More, with Feeling: Cold War Masculinity and the Sentiment of Patriotism in John Okada's *No-No Boy*," *Criticism* 47.1 (Winter 2005): 65–83.
- 39 William Petersen, "Success Story, Japanese-American Style," *New York Times Magazine* (January 9, 1966): section 6, 20–43.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 20–1.

- 41 Daniel I. Okimoto, *American in Disguise* (New York: Walker/Weatherhill, 1971), Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, *Farewell to Manzanar* (New York: Bantam Books, 1973). Further references in parentheses in the text.
- 42 Kim, *Asian American Literature*, 80–1.
- 43 Sone, *Nisei Daughter*, 158.
- 44 Harry Kitano, *Japanese Americans: The Evolution of a Subculture* (Upper Saddle Hall, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), 146, quoted in Okimoto, *American in Disguise*, 152.
- 45 Mitsuye Yamada, *Camp Notes and Other Poems* (1976; repr., Latham, NY: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1992). Further references in parentheses in the text.
- 46 Yamamoto, *Masking Selves*, 199.

Asian American Short Fiction and the Contingencies of Form, 1930s–1960s

JINQI LING

The period spanning the 1930s to the 1960s is pivotal to Asian American literary history in that it witnessed both the early development of the Asian American novel and a phenomenal growth of Asian American short fiction.¹ In making this observation, I do not suggest that these overlapping formations were coeval with each other, or that they fit comfortably into the familiar confines of periodization in American literary history. Rather, my entwining an examination of Asian American short fiction with that of the Asian American novel facilitates a more sophisticated understanding of the former than what a purely content-based analysis permits. Such a comparative approach demands a consideration of the formal differences between these two basic modes of Asian American narrative, as well as the personal, historical, and circumstantial factors that led important Asian American writers to choose the short-fiction form over the novel as a preferred instrument for representing their experiences in this period.²

To illustrate the argument, which is necessarily retrospectively constructed, this chapter performs a two-pronged mission. First, I contextually examine the works of two groups of Asian American writers whose practice in short-fiction writing contributed to the genre's prominence: those by Toshio Mori (1910–80) and Hisaye Yamamoto (1921–2011), on the one hand, and those by Bienvenido Santos (1911–96) and Carlos Bulosan (1913–56), on the other³ – a survey that teases out major themes and motifs of selected texts, especially relative to the authors' positions toward tensions leading to internment (for the first pair) or ruptures within immigrant communities occasioned by generational conflict, national identity, and race, gender, and class differences. Second, I theorize the relationship between the novel and short fiction as different formal responses to modernity, with an assessment of the realist origin and premises of the novel vis-à-vis the temporally more modulated – and referentially less predictable – tendency in short fiction. I argue that these four Asian American writers turned to the brevity of the short-fiction form in this

period because the form is uniquely suited for examining disjunctive modes of temporality, as well as for legitimizing small-scale disruption of the patterns of continuity closely associated with the novel form.

Preliminaries

Most will agree that the novel, with its implicit or explicit attempt to offer exhaustive transcriptions of the world, stands in contrast to short fiction, a generic species that aims at aphoristic brevity, metaphorical ellipsis, and implied significance. Writers often turn to the novel's narrativized duration, as well as its emphasis on a symbolic unity between language/mind and world/nature, to represent diachronic shifts of time and indulge an allegorical cast of imagination. Writers of short fiction, by contrast, seem prone to the synchronic, ambiguous, and ironic investments that the latter form invites – a mode of representation especially open to modern sensibilities of discontinuity, contingency, and fragmentation. Furthermore, short fiction, by dint of its compactness both in form and content, makes the process of storytelling more technical.⁴ Hence, Edgar Allan Poe celebrates the importance of craft in the form and regards the short tale as belonging to “the loftiest region of art,” while Cary Saul Morson considers short genres in general “a banquet of delicious morels” strewn with particular worldviews, philosophical premises, speculative scenarios, and witticism.⁵ These formal traits of short fiction determine that its content – even when designed to be social and political – often manifests itself as intense personal dramas that point, more than does the novel, to “the strangeness and ambiguity of life” or “absurdity in all its undisguised and unadorned nakedness.”⁶ Such a formally dictated orientation in short fiction may occasionally be used to affirm ahistorical arguments about the universality of all literatures. By contrast, I assume here that the meaning of a work of short fiction is historically specific: it bears the burden – as Edward Said argues – of the “worldly” occasions and empirical realities from which a literary text emerges, which also constitute textual and circumstantial constraints on its interpretations.⁷

The Asian American short fiction under examination, as a type of peripheral literary production, must be understood as both formally and historically contingent. Basic questions to ask include: Why did Asian American writers choose short fiction rather than the novel when both seemed available to them in the era? What did the writing of Asian American short fiction entail, not only as an act of self-representation but also a form of intellectual and even physical labor in the historical context in which it was composed?

The writers' life experiences are telling. In the early 1930s Mori decided to become a writer at the age of twenty-two while working as a full-time nurseryman, and, to realize his dream, scheduled a rigorous after-hour writing practice that typically lasted till daybreak.⁸ Yamamoto began her writing career by first getting involved in the launching of a camp newspaper in Poston, Arizona, where she was interned and, in the immediate postwar years, by contributing to the English sections of Japanese-language newspapers, as a housewife and mother of several children.⁹ After immigrating to the United States in 1930, Bulosan became a unionized itinerant laborer in the Pacific West and acquired his creative competence from mining public libraries, while practicing left-wing journalism for workers publications.¹⁰ With the exception of Santos – who received formal training in creative writing in the United States as a *pensionado* sponsored by the Philippine government¹¹ – none of the writers mentioned fits the category of the professional writer. And none – with Santos included – had their stories published in book form in the United States before the mid-1970s, when Asian American literature finally made its successful claim on the cultural establishment.

As the foregoing discussion makes clear, these Asian American writers' turn to short fiction in the period was not simply a matter of formal choice, although the short-fiction form, given the range of affective and temporal possibilities it manages to localize, did contribute to thematizing the uncertainty and open-endedness of Asians' experiences, either as labor immigrants or as members of a socially marginalized ethnic minority. Rather, these writers opted for short fiction mainly because the latter is unorthodox in its formula, flexible in its topical range, and innovatively eclectic in its construction of artistic visions. Compared with the novel, short fiction appealed to Asian American writers especially in a pragmatic sense: the writing of this type of narrative did not require guaranteed time, regular financial support, or the availability of professional audiences. As such, short fiction presented itself as a far more accessible aesthetic platform for experimenting with ways of realizing these writers' expressive dreams. The latter fact shows that whatever readership Asian American writers had in mind when they started their short-fiction projects, they were keenly aware that America's publishing industry and book trade operated in affirmation of the existing social, cultural, racial, and gender stratifications. Retrospectively, what these writers achieved in the period is not so much getting their individual talents recognized as contributing to the public dissemination of knowledge about Asians' suffering from discrimination, their struggles, and their daily aspirations, when such knowledge was conspicuously absent in the American popular imagination.

Nisei Views: Life before and beyond the Camp

Mori and Yamamoto participated in this process of ethnic cultural codification through portrayals of Japanese immigrant life from Nisei perspectives – portrayals set largely outside the traumatic experience of internment, despite the fact that both writers were interned and occasionally wrote about the camp. The primary focus of Mori's literary project was the prewar community; while Yamamoto straddled both the pre- and postwar Japanese American worlds cohabited by Issei and Nisei from a woman-centered and interethnic perspective. The representational priority that both writers give to prewar Japanese American life is rich in its historical implications: (1) it allows readers a rare access to the internal dynamics of the ethnic community in the era, about which there is a dearth of literary attention, and (2) it fosters an understanding of the internment not as an isolated event but as the cumulative result of prior histories, tendencies, practices, and attitudes, both within and outside the United States. Commenting on Mori's short-fiction productions along this line, Yamamoto observed that Mori's descriptions of Japanese America of the 1930s were filled with concerns about "the awkward Nisei situation" when "the storm clouds gathered," as if in anticipation of the concentration camps of 1942–5.¹² What Yamamoto refers to are the pressures felt by the American-born Japanese, both of Mori's and of her own generations, from the "disapproving" attitude that the world took toward Japan's expansionist behaviors during the interwar years, a situation that exacerbated the already prevalent racial prejudices against the Japanese living in the United States.

Mori's story "1936" (1936) implicitly addresses such a concern. Concentrating on a single day's activities, the narrator is seized by an intense desire to know the white people, the minds of his own generation, the concerns of Issei, and the culture of Japan. Such an urge to know culminates in the narrator's musings about "the bizarreness" of a scene of seeming racial harmony that he observes in a barbershop, whose customers include, besides himself, a Mexican, a Spaniard, and an Italian. "If one tiny barber shop could have four nationalities at one time," he reflects, "I could believe the vastness and the goodness of America's project. This is the place, the earth where the brothers and the races meet, mingle and share, and the most probable part of the earth to seek peace and goodwill through relations with the rest of the world."¹³

Worries about misunderstandings that would divide Issei and Nisei from the rest of American society implicitly inform "The Eggs of the World" (1949), another story that Mori evidently wrote in the 1930s. Central to

the plot of the story is an Issei alcoholic, who roams about with warnings against the danger of living within the shells of eggs, much to the confusion and disgust of others. The eggshell is a metaphor that Mori used to problematize the early immigrants' tendency to band together in Japanese enclaves. As if insinuating the violence that would eventually befall the ethnic community during the war, the drunkard predicts that an egg that remains unbroken from the inside would eventually be smashed from without in the form of "rape" or "assault."¹⁴ But the speaker's appeal for racial integration goes unheard because people do not know when he is sober and when he is drunk.

Mori implies that Issei and Nisei carry on their day-to-day activities under such an atmosphere with resilience and sobering practicality. "The Chessmen" (1941) describes the cutthroat competition between two nurserymen – an elderly Issei and a Nisei hired on a temporary basis – during a prewar economic slump. The tension originates from the nursery owner's plan to lay off the less experienced temporary help, a possibility that the latter seeks to prevent through his youthful aggression. Mori presents the physical and mental struggle between the two as a duel between two "strangers" meeting "face to face with fear" on a "lonely road," with the younger Nisei emerging as the ultimate winner of the contest (102–3). The theme of Issei's decline in workplace is also at stake in Mori's "Operator, Operator!" (1938). Its central character is an elderly gardener several months into debt on his rent because nobody wants to hire him. As a last resort, he uses the only coins left in his pocket to pay for a job advertisement in a local newspaper, hoping that an employer would respond. The story shifts between the man's recollections of his youthful days, his anxious waiting in the apartment room for a call, and his dread about being asked to leave by his landlady.

Such are the socioeconomic conditions facing several of Mori's male characters memorable for their tenacious quests for spiritual or artistic fulfillment. "The Seventh Street Philosopher" (1949), for example, features a middle-aged launderer obsessed with delivering public speeches on Buddhist traditions, utterly oblivious to his amateurish grasp of the topic, apathy among his audiences, and the irony of his narcissism. "Japanese Hamlet" (1939) describes an Issei's determination to become "the ranking Shakespeare actor" by spending all his time reciting lines from the English master's complete works, to the derision and annoyance of his friends, but the nodding approval of the story's narrator who sees merits in his "simple persistence" (40–1). "The Distant Call of the Deer" (1937) focuses on an Issei's strange habit of conducting a nightly exercise of playing a piece of Japanese music. The practice

disturbs the neighbors' sleep, scares dogs and cats, and infuriates his wife, but it becomes solidified after he wins, at the age of fifty-three, the third prize from a community-sponsored music contest.

"The Chauvinist" (1935) is perhaps the most speculative of Mori's stories about prewar Japanese immigrant life. The title of this story is ironic: it refers to what is opposite to traditional understandings of male superiority, that is, an Issei man's humorous acceptance of his sudden loss of hearing and subsequent confinement to the role of cooking for his socially active wife and fastidious children. Sustaining the man's positive attitude is a "new philosophy" that he invents for the occasion: he sees his hearing impediment as a higher "calling" that demands his display of "humbleness," "dignity," and "silent endurance" in the face of his misfortunes. From this perspective, his deafness and his relegation to the kitchen both become metaphors: as a "handicapped" male immigrant rendered socially relevant only for food preparation, his best hope is "cooking up the greatest taste of life" – by "scraping for crumbs" (17–18, 20–4).

A number of Yamamoto's most effective stories, though all written and published in the immediate postwar decades, are similarly vectored in the preinternment years, against a background of economic hardship and the embryonic formation of a Japanese American community bustling with agricultural activities. "Life among the Oil Fields" (1979), for example, uses an eight-year-old Nisei girl's perspective for a nonfictional account of her experience with the Roaring Twenties, an era marked, on the one hand, by the Volstead Act, Al Capone, flaming youth, and Black Thursday and, on the other, by the narrator's linguistic struggle at an American elementary school, her family's itineration across impoverished multiracial farming communities, her participation in agricultural labor and ethnic food preparation, and, above all, her witnessing of an arrogant white couple's perpetration, without reprisal, of a hit-and-run accident in an oil-field neighborhood that almost kills her younger brother. The white couple's careless treatment of human life is described in the story as a shameless repetition of Scott and Zelda's lifestyle,¹⁵ the enigmatic couple of the Jazz Age.

Yamamoto's "Yoneko's Earthquake" (1951) is a work widely celebrated for its multiple layers of meaning and rich symbolism. On the surface, the story is about the young Nisei girl Yoneko's experience of having her religious faith dashed, as well as her subsequent loss of psychological balance, both triggered by an earthquake that disrupts the routine of her parents' tomato farm and leaves her father permanently incapacitated for outdoor work. Underlying this manifest story are the reshuffled class and

racial dynamics on the farm that result from the father's displacement as a patriarchal figure, a development that in turn contributes to the demystification of Yoneko's secular construction of Marpo – a hired Filipino hand with colorful personality and multiple talents – as the ultimate bearer of “the word of God” (47). What puzzles Yoneko before the earthquake is that Marpo always appears “shy,” “meek,” and deferential in the presence of her parents (49). The earthquake and its aftermath both muddle and clarify Yoneko's thoughts: these events not only allow Marpo to replace her father symbolically as the mainstay of the family and have an affair with a mother increasingly unhappy about her loveless marriage, but also subsequently lead to Marpo's dismissal from the farm. The parallel developments generated by the earthquake – socially, emotionally, and psychologically – thus contribute to Yoneko's growing maturity as a “free thinker,” in the wake of what she considers a devastating “desertion” by Marpo – her beloved God figure (46, 55).

“Seventeen Syllables” (1949) is another of Yamamoto stories well-known for its verbal economy and dramatic overtones. In contrast to Mori's depiction of how Issei males are tolerated – either grudgingly or with good humor – for their impractical investments of time and energy, this story offers a critique of the flat denial of Issei women's artistic pursuits, in this case of Tome Hayashi's humiliating experience with her husband, who, angered by her taking extra time to receive the presenter of the prize she has won in a haiku poetry contest, burns the trophy in front of their children. The gender bias that Yamamoto exposes in traditional definitions of who can serve as the creative agents in a fledging ethnic community points to a range of attendant problems. The value of Tome's physical labor – her “ample share of picking tomatoes out in the sweltering fields and boxing them” in the packing shed, as well as her performance of the wifely/motherly duties of cooking, washing, cleaning, and housekeeping (9) – rarely figures in her husband's calculation of what constitutes daily work. Further complicating the matter is Tome's perception of her artistic impulse as being stifled by her arranged marriage. Hence, she asks her American-born daughter Rosie not to marry in the future. Despite “the familiar glib agreement” with which Rosie concedes to the mother's request, she daringly embarks on a relationship with Jesus Carrasco, the son of the Mexican family hired for the tomato harvest. Tome's recognition of the growing cultural gap between herself and Rosie is registered, at the end of the story, in her hesitation to embrace her daughter, who sheds frustrated tears about being torn between her own individual pursuits and her mother's expectations.

Short Fiction from the Filipino Diaspora

Santos and Bulosan contributed to the development of Asian American short fiction in rather different ways: not only did they depart from the U.S.-centered perspectives of Mori and Yamamoto, thereby showing the relevance of alternative histories to Asian American literary imaginations, but they differed from each other in their respective investments as well. Santos wrote compassionately about his “grief” over the pain of his less-fortunate compatriots,¹⁶ while Bulosan interpreted the wider implications of such pain from the perspective of an organic intellectual. The two writers’ social inclinations explain the different modalities of the Filipino immigrant life each emphasized: Santos took a keen interest in exploring *manong*’s existential dilemmas through a sophisticated literary lens, whereas Bulosan historicized such dilemmas from a pro-labor and critically international perspective.

“Scent of Apples” (1948) is paradigmatic of Santos’s fictional construction of the predicament facing Filipino immigrants. It describes the ironic life of Celestino Fabia, who has been away from his home country for more than twenty years and subsists, as the story begins, on an isolated country farm in the Midwest with his American wife and their biracial son. Drama unfolds when Fabia invites the first-person narrator to dinner at his home; the latter is a Filipino scholar appointed by the government-in-exile during the war to give a speech at a women’s college in the area. The story does not explicitly state the purpose of Fabia’s invitation, except through a mention of his asking the narrator a question about the current state of Filipino women toward the end of the lecture. The women that Fabia has in mind are long-haired, appropriately dressed, modest, and faithful – qualities emblemized in a framed picture that he keeps at his home, which shows the faded figure of a woman in Philippine dress, with her once “young and good” face “blurred.”¹⁷ Read as Fabia’s discourse on domesticity, the parallel between the ideal Filipino women he nostalgically remembers and the anonymous Filipino woman he has framed in a picture underscores the class implications of his marriage of convenience. His wife is plain, humble, and weather-beaten, exactly the same way he is – poor and aging – with the exception of their racial difference. Fabia’s inviting the narrator to his home thus acquires satiric implications: he hopes to change his wife’s impression of him through his association with the narrator, whom he considers a “cleaner looking,” “first-class” Filipino (24). Fabia’s futile attempt to gain respectability in such a way is what Santos criticizes through the metaphor of the scent of apples: the permeating smell of the overripe fruit suggests the state of Fabia’s Americanization, whose condition consists of nothing but

lonely winters, dying trees, a rundown homestead, and the spiritual decay of clinging to unexamined attitudes from his past.

“The Day the Dancers Came” (1955) strikes a similar note. It tells of the different attitudes taken by two *manong* bachelors – Filemon Acayan and Antonio Bataller – toward the visit of a dance troupe from the Philippines. The former sees the dancers’ coming as an occasion to renew his ties with the home country, while the latter, bedridden with a disease that has ironically turned his skin completely white, is indifferent to the event. Santos begins the story with a snow scene that highlights brightness – an uplifting moment – amidst the overwhelming gloom of the city, a scene during which Fil goes jubilantly to meet the dancers in a hotel and then records the sound effects of their performance in a theater. But the dancers ignore Fil, who, back in his apartment, inadvertently erases the content of his recording by pressing a wrong button. As Fil’s nostalgic dream turns sour, the snow stops falling; the snow-covered ground becomes slushy in the sun; and Tony’s diseased white skin turns cancerous and deadly.

Santos’s satiric portrayals of the Filipino immigrant condition in the pre-1965 era find perhaps their most poignant expression in “The Door” (1948), a story about the enigmatic function of an apartment door in a building rented by all-male Filipino immigrants. Behind the door live Delfin, a young Filipino, and his wife Mildred, a white woman with two little girls from a previous marriage. Central to the story is a tacit agreement between the couple that, when outside, Delfin not enter the apartment if the door appears closed until he sees a visitor leave. It happens that the first-person narrator of the story, Ambo, who is an elderly friend of Delfin’s, is asked by Mildred to fix the blinkers in her apartment on a Christmas Eve. While Ambo works inside, one of the little girls bolts the door by mistake, inadvertently treating Ambo as one of Mildred’s customers. Focusing on the stunned shock on Delfin’s face at the sight of Ambo’s coming out of the door, the story ends with the moral question that Delfin has avoided facing: the nature of the compromise by which he deals with his loneliness by accepting Mildred’s prostitution – presumably as a way of supporting her children – so long as the identities of her visitors remain unknown to him.

Compared with Santos’s subtly wrought tales, Bulosan’s short fictions are self-consciously historical in scope and explicitly partisan in their attempt to inventory images, memories, and moments, with a preference for sublimating his portrayals of misery and suffering onto a socially symbolic terrain.¹⁸ A good example is “The Story of a Letter” (1946), which tells of an impoverished Filipino father’s futile attempt to get a letter written in English – sent home by

his oldest son from the United States – translated into the native language. The father’s frustration is associated with a series of misfortunes: the village priest, whom he initially approaches for assistance, unexpectedly dies from overeating; the second son, whom he sends to study in the city, goes to America rather than return to help; a newly built country school, to which he sends the narrator – his youngest son – for education, turns out to offer courses only in Spanish; and the narrator, who ends up in the United States to study, finally sends the translated letter to him from a hospital bed. Ironically, the father has died several years before. Even more ironic is the content of the letter that is ultimately returned to the narrator at his American address: his oldest brother confesses to feeling “sad” and “sentimental” upon his arrival in America – a familiar story that takes almost eighteen years to be told, without ever reaching its designated audience.¹⁹

“Life and Death of a Filipino in America” recalls the first-person narrator’s five encounters with death: (1) as a small boy, he witnesses his mother’s violent death during childbirth; (2) at the age of ten, he watches his father decapitate the family’s *carabao* out of rage; (3) during his passage to America, he observes a compatriot’s being knifed to death; (4) in Seattle, he watches a talented Filipino roommate die from starvation; and (5) in California, he is present at a Filipino union advocate’s brutal murder by a white mob. What Bulosan offers through such a heavy emphasis on the loss of lives is not only an indictment of arbitrary power but also a critique of the brutalizing results of colonial impositions and forced exile.

In light of the two stories examined in the preceding text, “Homecoming” seems most suggestive of Bulosan’s strategy for working through the contradictions that threaten to paralyze Filipinos in diaspora: their homeland’s continuing subjugation to the United States, and the systemic racism that leaves little space for the struggling immigrants except for the rhetorical promises of American democracy. The story tells of Mariano’s return to the Philippines after twelve years of absence by focusing on his activities that span only one evening. Central to these activities is Mariano’s homebound walk from the bus depot, which is punctuated by memories of his childhood affections for his mother and of his American doctor’s chilling diagnosis of his terminal lung disease, by his excitement about finally reaching home and his fear of having to disclose to the loved ones that he is returning to die. The reunion that follows offers no solace. From his mother’s “deadening solemnity,” his first younger sister’s muffled cry, and his second younger sister’s bitter revelation of the family’s economic despair, Mariano realizes that they “suffered the same terrors of poverty, the same humiliations of defeat, that he had suffered

in America” (95). With both the horror of recognition and anger at the forces that have reduced his family to such hopelessness, he decides to leave. The home to which Mariano returns proves no less alienating than the America that “had crushed his spirit” (93). Home then becomes the starting point of Mariano’s renewed exile, as well as Bulosan’s emblem for his ongoing search for answers to the Filipino condition – other than that offered by his protagonist’s physical demise.

On the basis of this examination of selected works of four Asian American writers, I wish to suggest that the short-fiction form employed by these writers is highly effective for organizing experiences in ways both unique to a limited period of time and distinct in the temporal series from which they each spoke. The brevity and semiautonomy of this form seem especially appropriate for the writers’ examination of the still points of social and cultural turmoil in which they located their characters, as well as for their demonstration of the varied functions – hence the mimetic illusions of coherence – of an everyday that is shot through with contradictions. To a certain degree, the internal heterology of the short stories discussed in this chapter might best be understood as the product of the authors’ attempts to represent the ruptures of Asian American history in literary form: Mori’s witty and affectionate exploration of the paradox of generational tensions through manipulations of narrative distancing, Yamamoto’s staging of dramatic conflicts or transgression through the whisper of poetic insinuation, Santos’s provocative hesitations and skillful dancing between storytelling (*fabula*) and representation (*sjuzet*) of the immigrant plight, and Bulosan’s synthetic collage of analogous moments or situations that can be grasped only through structures of feeling embedded in alternative time frames.

These fictional techniques are profoundly political in that the vicissitude of tastes on the American literary market and its conditional opening to Asian American voices are rarely free of ideological presumptions, as evidenced in William Saroyan’s supportive but somewhat condescending assessment of Mori’s first published short story from *Coast* magazine in 1939. He saw Mori’s writing as blemished by its occasional lapses in grammar and syntax, despite his simultaneous recognition of Mori’s promise as “a natural born writer.”²⁰ What frustrated Saroyan at the time, one may argue, was a cultural mission that Asian American writers aimed to accomplish through the short-fiction form: to diversify, enrich, and transform the way English had been used in American literature through innovative injections of historically concrete and ethnically specific grammatical indices, points of view, tonality, and cultural idioms.

Rethinking the Novel through Short Fiction

This chapter concludes with a theoretical perspective on how short fiction legitimizes small-scale disruption of the patterns of continuity closely associated with the novel form, by engaging with major positions about the latter's realist premises and actual functions. The novel – as the dominant narrative form in Euro-American literatures since the mid-nineteenth century – is generally understood as an extended prose with structured plots, fictional settings and characters, diverse points of view, and, in some, sequential development with a clear beginning and ending. One complicating factor in entering discussion in this way is that the novel went through a decline after World War II;²¹ it gave way to the concept of “prose fiction,” which was subsequently displaced by the idea of “narrative.” In this context, the category of “novel” continued to be used, as scholars working on periodization generally agree, specifically as a mode of realism, a genre that Franco Moretti aptly describes as “the symbolic form” of “modernity.”²² Prose fiction, by contrast, is more associated with the ascendancy of structuralism since the 1950s, and it treats the novel as but one of its designated formal variants.²³

Narrative is a category most favored by boundary-breaking poststructuralists and postmodernists, who see the metonymical and the metaphorical as cohabiting all linguistic utterances, hence making no rigid distinction between literary and nonliterary discourses.²⁴ Sophisticated assessments of the realist novel may still be found in the early writings of Lukács, whose enduring contributions include seeing the novel as having a deceptively complete form but inherently incomplete content – an “inner problematic” that results from the increasing separation, as well as abstraction, of art from its life-sustaining networks or environments under forces of capital's reification.²⁵ The realist novel's structural internalization of the conflicting values of modernity thus makes it an artifact of irresolvable tensions, all repressed under the finished novel form as a kind of textual – and, correspondingly, interpretive – effect of ideological “containment.”²⁶

Such an understanding of the European realist novel is useful for discussing similar Asian American narrative forms. For example, Yoon Sun Lee observes that the realist novel often renders Asians' presence in capitalist modernity simultaneously invisible and conspicuous through its form, which at once hides the social consequences of Asians' racialization and affirms their stereotypically rendered designation as a cultural other. Focusing on the iterative routine of the modern Asian American everyday, Lee argues that Asian American writers' novelistic investment in the trivial,

the repetitive, and the predictable is emblematic of the effects of Asians' insertion into and struggle against Western modernity, while it also affirms the rigor and ongoing relevance of Lukács's critical realist paradigm.²⁷ Based on my examination of selected Asian American short fictions, I wish to delineate a different line of argument – beyond Lee's dialectical syncretism premised on the assumption that Asians' experience of racialization in the West both emblemizes and contributes to the singular effect of modernity, the primal rhythm of realism constituted by steady repetition,²⁸ and Lukács's uncompromising vision of totality – with two cautionary comments. First, the realist novel's tendency to confine its portrayal to the everyday is not unique to Asian American literary representations. This is so mainly because the novel form requires “a constant elusion of historical turning points and breaks” in its content, so that the coherent “unfolding” of the subjective individuality (or the “equilibrium” of the ego) essential to the novel form can be maintained.²⁹

The deliberate avoidance of temporal ruptures in the realist novel through its fusion of content with form centering on the everyday, as scholars have observed, is premised on a past-oriented historical vision, one that is shaped more by the organic ideals of Romanticism than by the crisis-ridden Benjaminian sense of the present.³⁰ Second, patterns of repetitive similarity deducible from the novel are not necessarily innate to the latter's realist bent, but rather often determined by particular ways of seeing or reading.³¹ For example, the frequent mention of “demons” or “ghosts” and the radical rewriting of Chinese folklore in Maxine Hong Kingston's memoirs *The Woman Warrior* (1976) strike only those with little knowledge about the Chinese language and culture as symptoms of free-wheeling postmodernism;³² they appear starkly realist to readers privy to the Cantonese vernacular and its Chinese American redeployment, whether these readers agree to Kingston's strategy for cultural appropriation or not. As such, the reality in a realist novel is always relative because readers have different degrees of familiarity with and access to its contexts, use different modes of interpretation, and occupy different cognitive domains of the novel's shifting horizon of expectations. Understood in this way, the repetitive everyday events described in the Asian American realist novel should also be seen as inherently varied in scale and irregular in duration as a result of their association with multiple temporalities that condition reading experiences, as well as the unsteady pulses produced by different forms and degrees of Asians' participation in modernity, the resultant disjunctions and upheavals always lurking beneath the given textual symptoms.

If the internal heteroglossia of the realist novel is often masked by its culturally conservative form and by naïve readers' failure to recognize the form's structural tensions, then short fiction works to expose both the dangers of "traditional" modes of constructing meaning through the novel form and the problematic of single modes of reading premised on essentialist conceptions of temporality. More important, it legitimizes a rhetorical means of representing reality without the routine drive for narrative completion, resolution, and coherence. In refusing to let readers be soothed by the apparent referential certainties of the realist novel, the short-fiction form thus becomes a more logical choice for dealing with the "random or aleatory event as the debris of temporality" both within and outside modernity.³³ Iteration of the quotidian in the Asian American novel contributes to renewal of critical realism only when readers are willing to pluralize the cognitive lens used for examining the everyday and to transform the narrow classical rendering of the quotidian in ways beyond the ken of Lukács's epic imagination. The short-fiction form, as a realized miniature of signifying contingency, is structurally subversive to the developmental time of modernity, a possibility that remains abstract under the formal constraints of the realist novel.³⁴

Notes

- 1 I want to thank Alexander Hammond, Lane Hirabayashi, Mark Seltzer, Min Hyoung Song, and Rajini Srikanth for reading and commenting on draft versions of this essay, and E. San Juan for sharing insights about Carlo Bulosan's short stories.
- 2 Amy Ling and Annette White-Parks designate Sui Sin Far's 1912 *Ms. Spring Fragrance* as the inaugurating publication of Asian American short fiction. See Amy Ling and Annette White-Parks, "Introduction," in Sui Sin Far (Edith Eaton), *Ms. Spring Fragrance and Other Writings*, ed. Amy Ling and Annette White-Parks (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 5–6. Susan Koshy traces the first Asian American novel to Onoto Watanna's 1904 *A Japanese Nightingale*. See Susan Koshy, "The Rise of the Asian American Novel," in *Cambridge History of the American Novel*, ed. Leonard Cassuto (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1050–2. I consider the literary environments between the 1930s and the 1960s more conducive to Asian American experiments with both narrative forms.
- 3 Most of the writers examined in this chapter were also practitioners of the novel. E.g., Mori authored *Woman from Hiroshima* (1978) and completed several novel-length manuscripts. Santos published five novels and four nonfictions in the Philippines, while Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* (1946) and *The Cry and the Dedication* (1995) are Asian American novelistic classics. In addition, the writers surveyed were not the only Asian American artists who produced short fictions in the era. E.g., Milton Murayama had "I'll

- Crack Your Head Kotsun” published in 1959, a story that later became part of his novel *All I Asking for Is My Body* (1975). Wakako Yamauchi composed her story “And the Soul Shall Dance” during the 1960s, which was subsequently included in *Aiiieeeee!* (1974).
- 4 This observation seems also true of the realist novels of Flaubert and Henry James – both claimed by the modernist canon – versus the realist works of Balzac and Charles Dickens.
- 5 Edgar Allan Poe, Review of *Twice-Told Tales*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Graham’s Magazine* 20 (May 1842): 299; Gary Saul Morson, *The Long and Short of It: From Aphorism to Novel* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 6, 14.
- 6 Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (1920 Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 51.
- 7 Edward W. Said, *World, Text, and Context* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 35.
- 8 Hisaye Yamamoto, “Introduction,” in Toshio Mori, *The Chauvinist and Other Stories* (Los Angeles: Asian American Studies Center, UCLA, 1979), 7.
- 9 Charles L. Crow, “A MELUS Interview: Hisaye Yamamoto,” *MELUS* 14.1 (1987): 73–7.
- 10 E. San Juan Jr., “Introduction,” in Calose Bulosan, *On Becoming Filipino: Selected Writings of Carlos Bulosan*, edited by E. San Juan, Jr. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 6–7.
- 11 Santos studied with I. A. Richards at Harvard, took classes with Whit Burnett, Editor of *Story* magazine, at Columbia, and won a Guggenheim Award while he participated in the University of Iowa Writers Workshop. See Bienvenido N. Santos, *Memory’s Fictions: A Personal History* (Quezon City, Philippines: New Day Publishers, 1993), 100, 186.
- 12 Yamamoto, “Introduction,” 4, 6.
- 13 Mori, *The Chauvinist*, 25, 29. Further references in parentheses in the text.
- 14 Toshio Mori, *Yokohama, California* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985), 117. Further references in parentheses in the text.
- 15 Hisaye Yamamoto, *Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories* (Latham, NY: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1988), 95. Further references in parentheses in the text.
- 16 Santos, *Memory’s Fictions*, 154–5.
- 17 Bienvenido N. Santos, *Scent of Apples and Other Stories* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1979), 23, 27. Further references in parentheses in the text.
- 18 Of the three Bulosan stories examined, only “The Story of a Letter” was published. The rest had remained in typescript in the University of Washington archives until San Juan found them and had them published in *On Becoming Filipino*. All these stories, suggests San Juan, were written from 1944 to 1947.
- 19 Bulosan, *On Becoming Filipino*, 65. Further references in parentheses in the text.
- 20 Yamamoto, “Introduction,” 1.
- 21 The novel’s decline as a creative practice in the postwar decades coincided with a growing interest in its theorization. This is the context in which Lukács’s *The Theory of the Novel* was introduced to American readers.
- 22 Franco Moretti, “From the Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Literature,” in *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*, ed. Michael McKeon (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 555.

- 23 Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 271–374; Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), 33–67.
- 24 Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 141–8; Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 188–209.
- 25 Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 47, 71–4.
- 26 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 52–3.
- 27 Yoon Sun Lee, *Modern Minority: Asian American Literature and Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3–15.
- 28 Whether repetition contributes to realism is a complex issue, which points, on the one hand, to the traditions represented by Aristotle, Homer, Cervantes, and Rousseau, and, on the other, to those maintained by Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, and de Man. Short of a full hearing of such histories, it seems sufficient to say that interpretations of how repetition relates to realism rest on different understandings of the nature of temporality. Notably, the first group of thinkers presumes a somewhat causal connection between repetition and realism, while the second typically evokes traditional views of mimesis to argue for the opposite.
- 29 See Moretti, “From the Way of the World,” 561–2. Moretti’s thesis apparently draws from what Lukács calls the “biological form” of the realist novel – the Bildungsroman – which both embodies and promises a fulfillment of the subjective aspect of totality. See Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 74, 77. Jameson reworks this Lukácsian argument, through Freud, into a question of subject formation on the part of the novel’s readers; see Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 151–84.
- 30 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 84–6; Said, *World, Text, and Context*, 230–42.
- 31 Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 127; Tzvetan Todorov, “Reading as Construction,” trans. Marilyn A. August, in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, ed. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 67–8.
- 32 See Michael M. J. Fischer, “Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory,” in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 208–9.
- 33 Dominick LaCapra, *History, Politics, and the Novel* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 137.
- 34 The critical potential of the realist novel can be brought into play only through historicization, a readerly procedure geared toward demystifying the referential certainty that appears given, and to identifying – as the short-fiction form accustoms them to seeing – the imperfectly joined ideological seams in the novel’s formal surface, as entry points for getting at its repressed content.

The Chicago School and the Sociological Imagination

CYNTHIA TOLENTINO

Prevailing understandings of the term *Asian American* assume that, as a concept, it emerged through the Asian American movement of the 1970s, and in conjunction with 1960s and 1970s social movements, including Black Power, the Chicano movement, and Second Wave feminism. This chapter offers another perspective by examining how conceptions of Asian American were formulated in the early twentieth century through the categorization of Asians as “Orientals” and their construction as a racial problem and a racial solution within mainstream American culture. What was labeled the “Oriental Problem” was a topic of concern to white missionaries, elites, and researchers in the University of Chicago’s Department of Sociology, but also generated a stage upon which Asian Americans came to have an authorized context for articulating and studying their personal experiences as Asians in the United States, in relation to other racial and ethnic groups as well as to earlier generations of immigrants. Scholarly interest in Orientals, along with the growing importance of urban sociology in interpreting race relations and the U.S. nation’s progress, generated new intellectual and institutional contexts for Asian Americans that, in turn, shaped the definition of an Asian American writer and the production of Asian American literature.

Contrary to entrenched views of literature as the antithesis of sociology, I argue that the Chicago School of Sociology provided an authorized scientific language, frameworks for intellectual inquiry, and institutional contexts that Asian American writers engaged in both direct and indirect ways. The Chicago School of Sociology provided Asian Americans with models of intellectual authority at the same time that it gave new value to their daily lives and self-understandings within and outside of their communities. I am not suggesting that sociology provides a foundational base for the development of Asian American literary production nor am I positing sociological origins for Asian American literature. While some Asian American writers may have encountered sociological texts in their university courses, the impact of the

Chicago School of Sociology on the development of Asian American literary production can more accurately be described as discursive, meaning that it might more productively be viewed as an engagement that is open-ended, uneven, and fraught, rather than direct and conclusive. This chapter suggests that ideas about what it meant to be Asian American and an Asian American intellectual and writer emerged through the research and networks generated by sociological studies of “Orientals.”

Explaining Migration: The Chicago School of Sociology

In the United States, the early twentieth century was marked by concerns over the integration of marginalized and immigrant groups into mainstream America. Social anxiety regarding increasing immigration from southern and eastern Europe to the United States, the mass migration of African Americans from rural areas in the south to urban zones in the north, and the rising economic and political status of Japan and the influx of Asian laborers on the West Coast provided the rationale for the intellectual construction of racialized communities as problems to be studied by professional experts. In numerous studies of how marginalized groups were incorporated into mainstream society, the Chicago School of Sociology developed research questions about culture and racial consciousness that became the basis for dominant academic and popular understandings of U.S. culture. In particular, these studies focused on the interplay of specific groups, with an eye toward the conditions of marginalization. The Chicago School of Sociology refers to scholars affiliated with the University of Chicago during the first half of the twentieth century. Robert E. Park remains the most famous figure; the group also includes Florian Znaniecki, Louis Wirth, W. I. Thomas, and Ernest Burgess. Over the years, these scholars trained several graduate students such as Emory Bogardus, E. Franklin Frazier, Roderick McKenzie, William Carlson Smith, and Everett Stonequist, who extended Chicago School methods and frameworks in their own important research.

Perhaps Park's most famous concept is the race relations cycle as the main process by which an individual is incorporated into mainstream society through a series of distinct stages: contact, competition, accommodation, and assimilation. The notion of assimilation as the ideal outcome of social integration into mainstream society was developed by Park and Chicago School of Sociology sociologists, and pervades contemporary interpretation of social dynamics. For Park and others, assimilation was the standard measure of

social integration, viewed as a natural process of civilization, or part of the tide of the history of Americanization, rather than a concept that was both specific and ideological. In upholding assimilation as the norm, Park claimed, "All of our so-called racial problems grow out of situations in which assimilation and amalgamation do not take place at all or take place very slowly."¹

The Chicago School of Sociology was instrumental in shifting the focus from biological notions of race, grounded in physicality and exemplified by eugenic theories, to culture-based concepts that included developmental theories of consciousness. As Henry Yu remarks, "The physicality of race became secondary to cultural consciousness. It was this tenet that profoundly marked American social thought, creating an interest in what eventually became termed 'identity,' the forms of consciousness that surrounded definitions of the 'self' and how individuals became groups."²

What, then, made it possible for some groups to assimilate successfully while others were unable to complete the cycle? In his 1913 essay "Racial Assimilation in Secondary Groups with Particular Reference to the Negro," Park argued that the chief obstacle to successful cultural assimilation was visible racial difference. As he contends, "It is not because of the mentality of the Japanese that they do not so easily assimilate as do the Europeans. It is because the Japanese bears in his features a distinctive racial hallmark, that he wears, so to speak, a racial uniform which classifies him. He cannot become a mere individual, indistinguishable in the cosmopolitan mass of the population, as is true, for example, of the Irish, and to a lesser extent, some of the other immigrant races. The Japanese, like the Negro, is condemned to remain among us an abstraction, a symbol – and a symbol not merely of his own race, but of the Orient and of that vague, ill-defined menace we sometimes refer to as the yellow peril."³ Although Park aligns "Orientals" and "Negroes" as groups that cannot successfully complete the race relations cycle because of visible racial difference, he ultimately assigns them different and hierarchical capacities for assimilation, promoting the "Oriental" as possessing the higher capacity for cultural assimilation in contrast to the "Negro." Though Orientals wore a "permanent racial costume" that separated them from white Americans, he suggested they were capable of cultural assimilation through social interaction. Using the assimilation cycle as a unifying concept, Park juxtaposed the "Negro Problem" and the "Oriental Problem." This contributed to the development of "double-consciousness" in Asian American racialization, or a process by which Asian Americans came to see themselves in primarily "cultural" terms and specifically in comparison to the presumed lack of a legitimate African American culture. Chicago School of Sociology's sociology of race

played an important role in linking the development of Asian American identity with the reinforcement of African American pathology.

Studying the Oriental Problem

As historian Henry Yu argues, the involvement of Chicago School of Sociology sociologists in the Pacific Coast Survey resulted in a change of status for the Oriental problem from a topic of “gentlemanly interest” for elite whites to an academic and institutional problem that required “objective study” through scientific research. This in turn broadened the possibilities for who could participate in the study, as subjects and as researchers, and generated formal networks of people who were interested in and focused on the experiences of Asians in America. The survey also effectively transformed who could be involved in producing theories about what it meant to be Asian in America: this group came to include people who had previously been excluded from academia and from traditional definitions of intellectuals.

The Survey of Race Relations on the Pacific Coast was the most extensive sociological study of the Oriental Problem in the twentieth century. It helped to define who was an Oriental and also shaped Asian American thinking on this question. The survey was commissioned by the Institute of Social and Religious Research in 1923 and ran through the 1920s as Congress was debating more restrictive immigration quotas and the ban on Asian immigration to the United States. As part of the social climate of the survey, concerns about preserving diplomatic relations with Japan, maintaining the flow of Asian labor to North America, and accessing expanding Asian markets were intertwined with missionary aspirations and humanitarian ideals.⁴

As research director for the survey, Park was charged with assembling a team to investigate the economic, religious, educational, legal, biological, moral, and social conditions that shape the lives of Asians in America and in relation to American and Canadian peoples.⁵ One feature that distinguished Chicago School of Sociology studies in the survey (and also more generally) was the use of interviews with subjects as “fieldwork” and scientific data. Elaborating on the theoretical emphasis on subjectivity, Park writes, “Migration as a social phenomenon must be studied not merely in its grosser effects, as manifested in changes in custom and in mores, but it may be envisaged in its subjective aspects as manifested in the changed type of personality it produces.”⁶ The Chicago School of Sociology sociologists were interested in how social change was registered in consciousness; to explore this process, they focused particularly on how an individual subject viewed and experienced migration.

According to Eckard Toy, survey researchers confronted numerous obstacles, but managed to conduct dozens of field studies, compiling 640 life histories, defined as brief biographical and autobiographical sketches or oral histories, and almost six thousand pages of related information sorted into “major” and “minor” documents about racial assimilation and social attitudes.

American missionaries J. Merle Davis, Galen Fisher, and George Gleason were the architects of the survey and specifically viewed the Oriental Problem through the lens of their missionary work in China and Japan. Chicago School of Sociology sociologists took up the Orientalist framework established by missionaries. By reinforcing the link between religious conversion efforts by white American missionaries in East Asia and the cultural assimilation of Asians in the United States, this framework established which transnational linkages and institutional practices would be viewed as formative to the history and identity of Asian Americans. Missionaries viewed Oriental culture as having foreign, far away origins and as being in opposition to native and white American culture.⁷ In reproducing this logic, the Chicago School of Sociology effectively narrowed the conceptualization of “Asian America” to refer primarily to Japanese and Chinese, excluding and sidelining groups such as Filipinos and East Indians, whose histories and experiences as colonial subjects of the United States and Britain did not conform to these criteria.⁸ Later in the chapter, I will discuss how Filipino writer Carlos Bulosan took up important analytical frameworks and concepts of the Chicago School of Sociology in his own transnational figuration of Asian America.

Furthermore, the survey defined Orientals in relation to their being perceived as cheap labor threatening the jobs of native whites. From their perspective, the survey was intended to address anti-Japanese racism on the Pacific Coast. Around this time, the California Alien Land Laws of 1913 and 1920 barred immigrants and nonwhites from holding property, and ensured that they would have to seek permits and leases that were valid for three years at the longest. These laws emerged from a climate of anti-Asian racism against the Chinese in the nineteenth century and, in the twentieth century, were especially directed at Japanese farmers and intended as a measure to help stem the flow of Japanese immigration to the United States.

More than other sociological studies of race at the time, the Pacific Coast Survey of Race Relations gave institutional and intellectual authority to the work of being interested in and talking about the experiences of being Asian in America. By redefining the “Oriental Problem” as an institutional problem, the survey enabled sociologists to take into account and reflect deeply upon Asian American words and experiences, which were

selectively attributed value as scientific material. This context gave rise to narratives that offered firsthand accounts of experiences of being an outsider and of what it meant to assimilate. In this way, the survey provided Asian Americans with contexts and an authorized language for interpreting and articulating their own experiences about being outsiders, and registering their experiences of racial discrimination in America. Several Asian Americans who were involved in the survey and other Chicago School of Sociology studies of race came to have their self-understandings altered by their contact with the intellectual construction of the “Oriental Problem” and were groomed as professional sociologists: Rose Hum Lee, S. Frank Miyamoto, Setsuko Matsunaga Nishi, Tamotsu Shibutani, and Paul Chan Pang Siu. These Asian American researchers came to embody Park’s figure of “marginal man,” as a “racial and cultural hybrid, who lived with an uneasy sense of half-belonging and intellectual sensitivity.”⁹ In describing his research among Japanese Americans, S. Frank Miyamoto put it this way: “One is an actor within a drama and feels the forces which shape it; but one is simultaneously an outsider, a member of the audience who observes the drama as it is played out by others.”¹⁰

The Chicago School and Asian American Literary Production

In contrast to the well-known clashes of African American writers Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison with the canonical sociology of Robert E. Park and Gunnar Myrdal, the formative presence of the Chicago School of Sociology vis-à-vis Asian American literature remains obscure. The powerful presence of sociology in structuring conceptions of Asian American literature is evident in the 1970s’ *Aiiieeeee!* anthology editors’ dismissal of certain writings as “assimilationist” and as “fake,” as opposed to “real” Asian American literature. The *Aiiieeeee!* group saw these writings as catering to exotic stereotypes of Asians for white audiences and, in their critiques through many decades, beginning in the 1970s, branded their authors, including David Henry Hwang, Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, and Jade Snow Wong, as native informants. Indeed, the Chicago School of Sociology’s presence can be traced to the criteria and terms by which specialists and nonspecialists have read Asian American literary texts. The themes of assimilation into mainstream society and the generation gap between Asian-born parents and U.S.-born children that the Chicago School of Sociology emphasized and elaborated continue to shape the reception and reading of Asian American literary texts, especially for non-Asian American readerships.

However, sociology's entanglements with Asian American literary production go beyond the question of influence. While it is possible that some Asian American writers explicitly engaged and adapted Chicago School concepts in their works, what seems more significant are the ways in which sociology helped to structure modern forms of Asian American expertise and developed institutional networks. By taking into account processes of knowledge production about Asian American subject formation, sociology opened up possibilities for self-understanding to Asian Americans in ways that also coincided with professional advancement and official recognition.

Some Asian American writers encountered sociology in their university education. One example is Pardee Lowe, who studied sociology as an undergraduate at Stanford University and went on to conduct research on San Francisco's Chinese community. He produced essays on the demographic, economic, social historical, and cultural dimensions for California's Emergency Relief Association, using personal interviews and firsthand reports of living conditions. These essays formed the basis for his book *Father and Glorious Descendant*, which was published in 1943. Lowe's accounts are often described as "case histories" and seen as offering insight into depression-era Chinese American lives.

Jade Snow Wong's 1945 autobiography *Fifth Chinese Daughter* highlights the university as a key site for developing her self-understanding as "Chinese American." Wong was not among those who participated in race relations surveys or undertook graduate study in sociology, but she calls attention to her discovery of sociology as an undergraduate student, suggesting that it served as her critical introduction to modes of inquiry, frameworks of evaluation, and narratives of race and immigration while also allowing her to evaluate her parents' vision of the world critically. In one scene, she highlights the transformative effect of her introduction to sociology course:

But if Latin was the easiest course and chemistry the most difficult, sociology was the most stimulating. Jade Snow had chosen it without thought, simply to meet a requirement, but that casual decision completely revolutionized her thinking, shattering her Wong-constructed conception of the order of things.¹¹

More than opening up alternative perspectives to those held by her parents, sociology also provided Wong with a model of intellectual authority. She describes, for example, how she confronts her parents' rules by "suppressing all anger, and in a manner that would have done credit to her sociology instructor addressing his freshman class" (128).

As Henry Yu observes, in framing particular kinds of knowledge about “Orientals” as exotic information, sociologists also defined for Asian Americans what it meant to be an intellectual in the United States.¹² To take an example of this dynamic, Wong observes in her sociology courses at a San Francisco junior college and also at Mills College that she received higher grades when she wrote about Chinatown or Chinese culture. She thus comes to understand that the things and people that she might otherwise perceive as uninteresting or peculiar only to her life were seen as having scientific value by her professors at the university. At the same time, however, she registers the pleasure that she feels in writing “about Chinatown and the people that she had known all her life” (132). Outside of the academy, Wong found that United States readers, media, and publishers were interested in her writings on Chinatown life because they offered an insider’s perspective that was inaccessible to white researchers and writers. Drawing on sociology to interpret her local and ethnic communities enabled her to depict herself as an authority and interpreter of race.

Sociology provides Jade Snow with a critical framework for organizing her understanding of the world in terms of categories such as “norms,” “mores,” and “folkways.” This framework enables her to refer not only to her personal world and everyday life, but also to see her observations as representative of universal knowledge, or what she calls an “awareness of and a feeling for the larger world beyond the familiar pattern” (132). It also provides her with a sense of self-awareness in her everyday contexts. In one such example, she uses her job as domestic live-in help as an opportunity to study the daily rituals and customs of white middle-class Americans. Here, she takes on the persona of a Chinese American female expert when referring to her employers by “type rather than name,” describing them as “the horsy family,” “the apartment-house family,” “the political couple,” and “the bridge playing group.” Her negotiation of sociological objectivity prepares her to figure herself as an object (“The small, lone female Jade Snow must have been merely another kitchen fixture for they never recognized her”) thus opening up a space in which she is not a subordinate but rather a privileged observer and analyst (106). Composed into a view, the space of a white American home is made available for Jade Snow to observe and define. As part of this process, she compares their households to the “high standards,” “Confucian decorum,” and “Christian ideals” of the Wong household, and finds them wanting (106). It is here that we see most clearly how Wong critically engages sociology’s explanatory authority and methods. By adapting its formal conventions and claims to speak for

her, she constructs a sphere that is different from, even as it accompanies, the reproduction of scientific authority.

The elevated status that Chicago School sociologists of race gave to notions of subjectivity helped to define sociology as an especially humane and forward-looking field in contrast to other academic disciplines. Indeed, Park carefully distinguished the objectives and work of sociologists from those of historians and statisticians. In his view, sociologists did not concern themselves with facts. Gathering facts, he explains, was the work of the historian, whereas enumerating and analyzing facts were tasks undertaken by the statistician. Following Park's formulation, sociology was to be primarily interested in the meanings of facts to the persons involved and relatedly in the study of attitudes and their development over time.¹³ For Park, the ideal intellectual perspective and critical approach was a combination of empathy and objectivity that would, in turn, facilitate an understanding of the development of "attitudes and values" within a broader social context.

Elaborating on Park's view of sociology as a combination of empathy and objectivity, Emory Bogardus, a sociologist at the University of Southern California and Park's former student, developed an ethnic distance scale, a system for measuring changes in attitudes toward different races, classes, and nationalities. In his study of immigration and race attitudes, Bogardus coined the concept of social distance, defined as the difference in understanding that exists between persons and groups, or between an individual and a group. As an analytic convention and scientific tool, Bogardus's system gave value to the subjectivities of marginalized groups, even as such self-expressions were highly mediated by the sociological contexts, rhetoric, and categories of experience.

Carlos Bulosan's autobiographical novel *America Is in the Heart* offers an apt demonstration of the Chicago School of Sociology standard of combining empathy and objectivity. His appropriation of the sociology of race was not explicitly with Park and his colleagues nor with specific texts, but rather with the Chicago School of Sociology theories of race and culture that had become the established academic and popular frameworks for explaining Filipinos as a racial problem. Bulosan's engagement with Chicago School of Sociology sociology makes visible the specific racial and sexual registers through which Filipinos were viewed while also countering some of their claims and conclusions. Though Bulosan was not university educated like Lowe and Wong, he also modeled his literary persona around that of a sociologist of race in order to assert his expertise on the Filipino migrant community on the West Coast of the United States during the early twentieth century. In so doing, he

was able to engage and counter assumptions and theories of the Filipino race problem, which involved the construction of Filipinos as primitives and as racial and sexual threats to white women, as well as unfair job competition to white men. *America Is in the Heart* (1946) is his most famous book and focuses on Filipino workers in the agricultural fields of the West Coast of the United States and in the canneries of Alaska. The text references racial and gendered stereotypes, legal cases, and interactions between Filipino migrant laborers in ways that repeat and contradict sociological studies of the “Filipino problem.”

Rather than presenting his encounters with racist violence in purely personal terms, Bulosan borrows scientific language and narratives to situate a series of racist incidents in which he is the object within a larger context and gives them collective meaning. In taking up the form of a generic sociological narrative, Bulosan figures himself as both an unenlightened subject who does not understand the “vast social implications of the discrimination against Filipinos,” as well as an analyst who develops the perspective to interpret events and to highlight their importance retrospectively.¹⁴ Instead of relating a liberal humanist epiphany, Carlos’s story focuses on how he adopted a specific set of knowledge practices that enable him to analyze a situation in which he had before been only the object.

The historic and material pressures specific to *America Is in the Heart* center on objectification and racialization as mutually constitutive processes in U.S. history. To describe his protagonist Carlos’s shift from object to subject, Bulosan takes up a narrative implied by the sociological concept of social process, which Bogardus defined as a description of social changes and the effects of these changes on the attitudes and values of all the people involved. The scientific value of this process for the study of social problems, he explains, is not located in the description, but rather in its significance in “human terms.”¹⁵ By placing a premium on the representation of subjectivity, sociology could breathe new life into the “raw material” of statistical data.

By adapting the explanatory authority of sociologists of race, Bulosan offers counternarratives to sociological claims about Filipinos. Whereas sociologists and others attributed the Filipino race problem to the predominantly male composition of the Filipino workforce and the deviation of Filipino formations from a heterosexual family norm, Bulosan depicted a Filipino male workforce as emerging out of historical conditions defined by colonial policy, anti-Filipino violence, and racial segregation. Where academic and popular representations of Filipinos highlighted the absence of family and stable homes, his text foregrounds the difficulty of Filipino efforts to develop literary and political networks. Attributing his discovery of Philippine national hero

and anticolonial writer José Rizal to his study of world literature, Bulosan remarks, “Why I had forgotten him, I did not know.”¹⁶ His personal memory renders visible the marginalization of an official history of Filipino resistance to colonization, which stands as an alternative to sociological accounts of Filipino pathology.

Cultural historians have traced the emergence of a “Filipino problem” to the late 1920s, with the eruptions of racial violence against Filipino laborers in California and the Pacific Northwest. During this time, sociological studies that focused on the Filipino race problem shaped academic and popular thought about Filipinos, but also contributed to the development of sociology’s analytical conventions and self-representation as a rising profession. In particular, research on the Filipino problem provided an important staging ground for Chicago School of Sociology sociologists to consolidate their explanatory authority over race. In the midst of an increase in Filipino migration following the ban on “Oriental” immigration mandated in the 1924 Immigration Act, Bogardus, whose students at the University of Southern California included Filipinos, directed numerous studies of the “Filipino race problem” during the 1930s.¹⁷ In his 1932 essay “What Race Are Filipinos?” Bogardus describes Filipinos as an “admixture almost as mixed as Americans in the United States.”¹⁸ Using language that reinforces both a proprietary relation to Filipinos and a pluralist national identity, Bogardus writes: “What race are Filipinos? Not one yet, but one in the making. What shall we label them racially, if they must be labeled? The answer depends in part on what racial classification we use.”¹⁹ Defining Filipino racial identity as a work-in-progress, Bogardus placed white American experts as overseers of Filipino racial identity. In doing so, he elaborated the narrative of Filipino uplift toward a white American ideal implied by the policy of benevolent assimilation, but defined it as part of a scientific and objective process. Rather than being seen as ideologically exercising power over these subjects, sociologists of race emerge from these discursive practices as intelligently and objectively giving order and life to “the Filipino.”

Although the Survey of Race Relations on the Pacific Coast focused primarily on Chinese and Japanese in the United States in order to theorize the “Oriental Problem,” it would be an error to say that the Chicago School of Sociology studies excluded Filipinos. To understand how Filipinos were different from Orientals or how Filipinos were and were not American, sociologists thus had to consider the subjective thought and self-understanding of Filipinos as valuable, scientific data. According to Donald Elliott Anthony, for example, the main difference between the Filipino problem and the Oriental Problem

could be traced to the “attitude of the Filipino.”²⁰ In this way, sociological research on the Filipino problem gave discursive and institutional value to the notion of Filipino subjectivity. The emphasis that sociologists placed on subjectivity, however, did not mean that they did not continue to use biological definitions of race in their arguments on Filipino racialization. In arguing that Filipinos did not see themselves as naturally subordinate and in fact resented being classed with Orientals, Anthony took into account the colonial status of the Philippines and the education-oriented policy of benevolent assimilation, but also based his conclusions on assumptions about the “nature” of Filipinos.

Sociological studies of the Filipino problem may thus be seen as part of a long prehistory of Asian American literature. For example, Bulosan’s engagement with racialized sexual stereotypes indicates a larger context involving a series of legislative acts that incorporated sociological knowledge production as a means by which to legitimate U.S. state protection of white racial identity. The use of academic scientific studies of the Filipino problem in the propagation of racist laws is made clear in Bulosan’s account of Filipino racialization: “Anthropologists and other experts maintained that Filipinos are not Mongolians, but members of the Malayan race. It was then a simple thing for the state legislature to pass a law forbidding marriage between members of the Malayan and Caucasian races.”²¹ The definition of Filipino racial identity, as Bulosan suggests, is a product of discriminatory legislation that draws upon scientific studies of the Filipino problem for ideological support.

To become a knowledge producer, Bulosan had to adapt a sanctioned discourse that would enable him to compete with scientific experts who were studying the Filipino problem. He turns to scientific language to convey rising anti-Filipino sentiment, defining it as a “condition” that structures and haunts the lives of Filipinos in the United States. Even as sociologists simultaneously produced knowledge about the racial classification of Filipinos and used it to promote sociology as a specific professional field and as an “American” social science, U.S. colonial subjects such as Bulosan depicted Filipinos as experts on Americanization.

Whereas Bulosan appropriates the language of sociology in order to reposition Filipinos vis-à-vis U.S. colonization, other Asian American writers, such as John Okada and Susan Choi, bring into focus the physical presence and rising authority of social scientists, some of whom were Nisei, or second-generation Japanese, in Japanese American internment camps during World War II. In Okada’s 1957 novel *No-No Boy*, a Nisei sociologist gives a lecture to the Issei, the first generation of Japanese immigrants, in which he compares American and Japanese family relationships and urges them to

become “companions” to their Americanized children, claiming that they do not know their own children. The scene notes that many Issei found the lecture offensive, but then brings into focus one couple that is inspired to try to see their daughter in a new way, rather than as a Japanese child in need of protection from the “decadent ways of an amoral nation.”²² In her 2003 novel *American Woman*, Susan Choi rewrites this scene, emphasizing, at once, the skepticism with which the Issei regard the Nisei experts and the internment camps as a key site for the rising authority of social scientists in managing the integration of marginalized groups into the U.S. nation: “In the camp context the kid had translated his aborted education into professional credentials; he was not just psychologist but prophet, explicator, architect of the new and improved Japanese-born American people.”²³ Yet where Okada’s sociologist dramatizes sociology’s focus on contact between dominant and subordinate groups, Choi’s psychologist registers the significance of social psychology in sociological theories of race, exemplified by Park’s interest in the emotional instability, or crisis and malaise, of marginalized groups. Choi offers a close-up of the Japanese American son, who “let his own face go stiff like a mask,” believing himself to be invisible in contrast to his parents’ hypervisibility in the American setting of the Mess Hall dance.²⁴ Here the Japanese American son is differently configured than Park’s marginal man, a deracinated individual in possession of enlightened and objective double-consciousness. His partial foreignness, symbolized by the mask, provides him with insight regarding his parents’ racialization and obsolescence in the United States and a fraught understanding of his different racialization and ambivalent membership as Japanese American.

From the “Oriental Problem” to “Asian American Studies”

Many critics date the declining hegemony of the Chicago School of Sociology over the field to the mid-1930s, signaled by orientation toward a more “scientific” sociology and a greater emphasis on methodology, alongside the rise of other sociology departments as centers for research and graduate training.²⁵ By the late 1950s and early 1960s, sociology’s broader authority over U.S. race relations was also waning, exemplified in part by Gunnar Myrdal’s failure to have predicted the impact of the civil rights movement. The latter signaled a shift in emphasis from his American Creed model, which emphasized white Americans and their extension of democratic values, to a focus on marginalized groups and race-based social movements.

Nevertheless, the persistence of the Chicago School of Sociology's centering of ethnicity, as a culture-based concept of race, is evident in the repositioning of Asian Americans as "model minorities." Since the 1960s, the term *model minority* has been used to depict Asian Americans as "ethnic minorities" who have overcome marginalization and achieved success in the United States without government assistance, in contrast to African Americans and Puerto Ricans. While the "model minority" idea appears to offer a positive representation of Asians, in contrast to explicitly negative stereotypes such as the "Yellow Peril," several scholars including Robert G. Lee, Colleen Lye, Mae Ngai, and Gary Okihiro have noted the ways that it reproduces the foreignness of Asians and enables new forms of discrimination.²⁶ Building on the Chicago School of Sociology's framing of Asians as culturally assimilable, if racially marked, the model minority myth defines Asian Americans as exemplars of U.S. immigrant success stories rooted in hard work, family values, and financial self-reliance. In this way, Asian Americans were crucial to the attempts by social scientists, journalists, and politicians to explain the persistence of poverty and unemployment through what politician and sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan called a "culture of poverty" endemic to African Americans and Puerto Ricans, defined as "problem" minorities.

The drive to assert the significance of race over cultural notions of ethnicity has animated Asian American activism, writing, and scholarship for almost half a century. Many Asian American activists of the 1960 and 1970s rejected the idea that Asian Americans were model minorities that should distance themselves from African Americans and in so doing promoted "Asian American" as a unifying term that could provide a political and cultural identity for Asian ethnic groups by appealing to shared histories and a collective experience of racialization and racism. The term *Asian American* was also seen as a means of banishing the term *Oriental* as a racist and exoticizing term.²⁷

Undoubtedly, the Chicago School of Sociology has had a formative impact on Asian American literature over the course of the twentieth century. Indeed, the reframing of Asian Americans as model minorities, or "solutions" to the "problem" of race and racism, has led scholars to further investigate the emergence of "Asian America" through sociological frameworks. "How does it feel to be a solution?" asks Vijay Prashad, revising W.E.B. DuBois's famous query to black Americans in *The Souls of Black Folks*.²⁸ Renewed interest in sociology's figuration of Asian Americans as model minorities has helped to bring Asian American graduate students and writers who were trained by Chicago School of Sociology sociologists or influenced by sociological narratives into visibility. As Yu has observed, Asian American activists of

the 1960s and 1970s valued early sociological accounts for their “authentic voices” even as they rejected sociology’s notion of the “Oriental Problem”; this contradictory stance toward sociology led them to neglect the possibility of Asian American sociological analysis.²⁹ As he and others have suggested more recently, the uneasy relation between Asian American writing and the sociology of race is made more complex when we attend to the ambivalent ways in which Asian Americans developed their self-understandings through sociological narratives.

Notes

- 1 Robert E. Park, “Human Migration and the Marginal Man.” *American Journal of Sociology* 33.6 (1928): 890.
- 2 Henry Yu, *Thinking Orientals: Migration, Contact, and Exoticism in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 45–6.
- 3 Robert E. Park, “Racial Assimilation in Secondary Groups with Particular Reference to the Negro,” *Race and Culture* (New York: Free Press, 1950), 890–1.
- 4 Eckard Toy, “Whose Frontier? The Survey of Race Relations on the Pacific Coast in the 1920s,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 107.1 (Spring 2006): 39.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 38.
- 6 Robert E. Park, “Human Migration and the Marginal Man,” in *Race and Culture* (New York: Free Press, 1950), 887.
- 7 Yu, *Thinking Orientals*, 64.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 192.
- 9 Fred H. Matthews, *The Quest for an American Sociology: Robert E. Park and the Chicago School* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1977), 632.
- 10 Yu, *Thinking Orientals*, 153.
- 11 Jade Snow Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1945), 124. Future references in parentheses in the text.
- 12 Henry Yu, “On a Stage Built By Others: Creating an Intellectual History of Asian Americans.” *Amerasia Journal* 26.1 (2000): 144.
- 13 Matthews, *Quest for an American Sociology*, 114–15.
- 14 Carlos Bulosan, *America Is in the Heart* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973), 143.
- 15 Bogardus writes, “To define a social process is to describe the series of social changes that the process involves, and most important, the effects that these changes exert upon the attitudes and values of all the persons involved. In this way the significance of a social process becomes vivid. After all, its meaning in human terms is invaluable in the study of social problems.” Emory S. Bogardus, *Social Problems and Social Processes: Selected Papers from the Proceedings of the American Sociological Society, 1932* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1933), xi.
- 16 Bulosan, *America Is in the Heart*, 260.
- 17 Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 111.

- 18 Emory Bogardus, *Contemporary Sociology: A Companion Volume to the History of Social Thought* (Los Angeles: University of Southern California Press, 1932), 19.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Donald Elliot Anthony, "Filipino Labor in California." *Sociology and Social Research* 16.2 (January–February 1931): 156.
- 21 Bulosan is citing the 1933 *Roldan vs. The United States* case, in which U.S. federal courts relied upon ethnological studies in the decision to allow the marriage between a Filipino man and Caucasian woman, based on the racial classification of Filipinos as "Malay," rather than "Mongolian." Bulosan, *America Is in the Heart*, 143. For a fuller account of Roldan, see Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 115.
- 22 John Okada, *No-No Boy* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1979), 125.
- 23 Susan Choi, *American Woman* (New York: Harper, 2003), 327.
- 24 Ibid., 330.
- 25 Matthews, *The Quest for an American Sociology*, 179.
- 26 Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 267.
- 27 For more discussion of the terms *Asian American* and *Oriental*, see William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); James Kyung-Jin Lee, *Urban Triage* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); and Daryl Maeda, *Chains of Babylon* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).
- 28 Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 6.
- 29 Yu, *Thinking Orientals*, 193.

PART III



THE ASIAN AMERICAN
MOVEMENT

Documenting the Third World Student Strike, the Antiwar Movement, and the Emergence of Second-Wave Feminism from Asian American Perspectives

DARYL JOJI MAEDA

Although writers of Asian ancestry in the United States produced fiction, poetry, and drama for decades prior to the 1970s, Asian American literature per se did not arise until the era of social activism known as the Asian American movement. In the late 1960s and early 70s, the Asian American movement fought against racism; drew inspiration from the civil rights, black power, antiwar, and student movements; and encouraged Asians of various ethnicities to unite as Asian Americans and work in solidarity with blacks, Latinos, and American Indians.¹ The movement also nurtured a cultural zeitgeist that rejected assimilation and encouraged Asian Americans to embrace their distinctive cultures, histories, and identities. Asian American literature was born during this turbulent time of political, social, and cultural upheaval as an Anglophone body of writing dedicated to documenting the experiences and expressing the cultures of Asians in the United States. Literature served as a way to make visible the long history of Asian Americans, expose the struggles they faced in a racist and exploitive nation, celebrate the communities and cultures they built, and envision a more just and equitable society.

In this chapter, I lay out a genealogy of Asian American literature steeped in radical, antiracist, and antiimperialist politics, which generated a powerful drive for cultural and literary self-determination. Doing so avoids rehashing the worn-out literary feud between Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston, which has sadly overshadowed discussions of Asian American literature of the early 1970s.² Instead, it highlights how the impulse that motivated college students to strike for establishing ethnic studies and Asian American studies also led to the creation of Asian American theatrical companies; it demonstrates that opposition to the Vietnam War strengthened pan-Asian solidarity

among Asian Americans and, in turn, enabled the flourishing of pan-ethnic arts and culture organizations; and it credits Asian American women playing vital roles in the emergence of Asian American literature through their insistence on gender equality. Defining Asian American literature in this way as a committed body of work also suggests the necessity of adopting a more capacious notion of the literary. Hence, I open up alternative literary archives of reportage, speeches, flyers, cartoons and drawings, and movement newspapers, because all of these forms employ the literary elements of imagery, tropes, and narrative.

To understand the emergence of Asian American literature, we must examine the social and cultural milieu from which it arose. Asians began migrating to the United States and Hawai'i in the 1850s, but a series of racist exclusion laws targeting Asians curtailed mass immigration. The Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), Gentlemen's Agreement (1907), and Tydings-McDuffie Act (1934) barred the three largest immigrant streams of Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos, respectively, and the Immigration Act of 1924 served as a general Asian exclusion act. Due to these restrictions, by the 1960s, a majority of Asian Americans were native-born English speakers.³ These exclusions were based upon the representation of Asian immigrants and their descendants as an inassimilable and threatening Yellow Peril, a portrayal that lasted until World War II. However, during the Cold War, a countervailing image emerged, which depicted Asian Americans as a model minority that had overcome prior prejudice by assimilating well, working hard, and not protesting against racism.⁴ These opposing ideas put Asian Americans into a double bind: on the one hand, they continued to experience prejudice and discrimination, but, on the other, they were lauded precisely for not resisting their oppression.⁵ This contradiction fueled the political and artistic movements to oppose racism and reclaim Asian American cultures.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the civil rights movement exposed the hypocrisy of the United States' claim to be a global beacon of equality and democracy as it vied against the Soviet Union for geopolitical domination.⁶ While the civil rights movement tended to argue for equal inclusion in U.S. institutions, the black power movement that gained strength in the late 1960s viewed racism to be a constitutive component of a system of exploitation that structured the U.S. society and economy, argued for black empowerment and autonomy, and encouraged racial pride.⁷ This viewpoint provided a critical spark for the Asian American movement, which stressed that Asians of all ethnicities in the United States shared a common oppression with each other, and furthermore, with other "Third World"

people – defined as nonwhite people in the United States and colonized people around the globe.

Asian American Activism Emerges at San Francisco State College, 1968–1969

Asian American participation in the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) strike at San Francisco State College revealed the nascent Asian American movement's commitment to self-determination for Asian American communities and solidarity with other nonwhite groups in the United States.⁸ It was appropriate that the first large-scale Asian American actions took place at San Francisco State, which had been roiled in student activism throughout the early to middle 1960s. On campus, students opposed ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corp) recruitment and fought to create a Free Speech Zone. Off campus, they protested at the San Francisco hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee and conducted sit-ins against hiring discrimination at the Sheraton-Palace hotel and the Cadillac auto dealership. By the late 1960s, the anti-Vietnam War and black power movements had eclipsed the civil rights movement as the primary motivators of student politics. Black power, with its emphasis on self-determination for communities, exerted an especially palpable influence on students of color.⁹

Despite being a commuter campus catering to nonelite students, San Francisco State did not serve the needs of all of the constituents in the diverse city in which it was located. In the years leading up to the strike, a number of student organizations fought for better access to education for their communities. The Black Student Union (BSU) led by Jimmy Garrett, who had served as a coordinator with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in the South, had extensive connections with the black power movement and conducted a tutorial program aimed at recruiting black students. The Latin American Student Organization (LASO) and Mexican American Student Confederation (MASC) similarly recruited in the barrio of the Mission District. Asian American groups also sought to build bridges between the college and the ghettos of their communities. Intercollegiate Chinese for Social Action (ICSA) established a tutoring and recruitment program in Chinatown, and Pilipino American Collegiate Endeavor (PACE) operated one in the Mission District. In contrast to ICSA and PACE, which were ethnic-specific organizations, the San Francisco chapter of the Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA) was explicitly dedicated to multiethnic Asian solidarity, even though most of its members were Japanese American.

Although all of these groups sought better access to education, none saw access alone as the ultimate solution. Instead, they strove to remake education by enabling communities of color to seize control of the production and dissemination of knowledge. Black students were frustrated by the slow pace of implementation of black studies classes; Chicano students were angered by the firing of a popular Chicano professor who taught a course in Mexican American history; and Asian American students were exasperated by their absence from the curriculum. Decolonization movements in Latin America, Africa, and Asia inspired these students and encouraged them to see themselves not in isolation but as part of a global struggle against racism and imperialism. Consequently, although each student group struggled for better education for their respective communities, black, Chicano, Chinese, Filipino, and Japanese American student activists at San Francisco State did so within a framework of interracial solidarity.

The Third World Liberation Front formed in the spring 1968 semester as a multiracial coalition comprised of the BSU, LASO, MASC and the three Asian American organizations – ICSA, PACE, and AAPA. The coalition was governed by a central committee comprised of two representatives from each of the six student groups that made policy decisions and communicated them to the constituent organizations. This structure shows that the TWLF was organized around the principle of multiracial alliance building, while still respecting the autonomy of racial and ethnic groupings. Significantly, although the TWLF enjoyed significant support from white students, actual membership was restricted to “Third World” people in accordance with the ethos of self-determination. The TWLF won some concessions from the college administration for increased admissions of nonwhite students and the implementation of black studies and ethnic studies courses. However, promises on both fronts remained unfulfilled in the fall 1968 term. In addition, the college suspended George Mason Murray, a graduate student instructor who also served as Minister of Information of the Black Panther Party, for making supposedly inflammatory remarks.

In response, the BSU and TWLF jointly called for a strike to shut down the entire campus beginning on November 6. The BSU issued ten nonnegotiable demands and the TWLF added five of its own. They boiled down to the creation and funding of a Department of Black Studies and a School of Ethnic Studies in which student organizations would oversee curricula and the hiring of faculty and administrators, full admissions for nonwhite applicants, the financial aid office being put in the hands of people of color, and amnesty for strikers. For the next five months, strikers picketed, marched, and protested.

At daily rallies in the quad, speakers exhorted nonstrikers to abandon classes and join the protests, and those who continued to attend classes were forced to cross picket lines. Acting President Samuel Ichiye (S. I.) Hayakawa, who was appointed to crack down on the strike, called in the San Francisco Police Department, which brutally attacked strikers, often without provocation.

The TWLF enjoyed significant community support. Prominent black leaders, including newspaper publisher Carlton Goodlett, supported the BSU. Although opinions were split in Asian American communities, older Nisei figures (second-generation Japanese Americans, as opposed to most of the strikers who were Sansei, or third generation) such as Edison Uno, Raymond Okamura, and San Francisco State faculty member James Hirabayashi supported the Asian American strikers. By March 1969, the energy of the strike was flagging after months of pitched action. More than seven hundred strikers had been arrested and some were jailed. The TWLF settled with the administration, which agreed to create the first-ever School of Ethnic Studies with departments of black studies, La Raza studies, American Indian studies, and Asian American studies. Hirabayashi served as the first dean of the new school. While the creation of the school constituted a major victory, it was nevertheless partial, as strikers' demands for student and community control over hiring and curricula were not met.

The politics of Asian American participants in the TWLF strike are clear. First, they adopted a framework that viewed Asian Americans as subjects who suffered from racism and exploitation alongside other people of color in the United States, and therefore insisted that they should practice interracial solidarity. Second, this understanding highlighted similarities among racialized groups, but insisted that each community should determine its own destiny. In the realm of education, that meant community control over the production and dissemination of knowledge. Finally, by using the moniker "Third World," they aligned themselves with colonized people across the globe. All of these qualities can be seen in the poetry of Janice Mirikitani, a member of the San Francisco chapter of AAPA who went on to become a celebrated poet. Her coedited collection of poetry, *Time to Greez! Incantations from the Third World* (1975), evinces the Third World perspective of the TWLF strikers.¹⁰ It comprises distinct "Asian," "Black," "American Indian," and "La Raza" sections, each overseen by editors from those communities. The editors emphasized the distinctiveness of each community, stating that the poems emerged from "working in our respective communities" and "articulating who we are through our own eyes and entrails" (v). However, the act of publishing the poems as a unified collection makes clear that the poems must be read

together. As Maya Angelou wrote in the introduction, “Now in this Book [*sic*], *Time to Greez!*, we hear the truth – Blacks, Browns, Reds, Yellows are telling the story. The poetry sings and the total effect is harmony” (iii). This metaphor encapsulates the TWLF strike ideology of autonomous communities of color coming together in solidarity.

The poems comprising the Asian American section of *Time to Greez!* decried the exploitation and oppression of Asian American communities, celebrated cultural resistance and endurance, and called for continued struggle in the United States and abroad. In “Summer ‘74,” Luis Syquia, one of the “Flip poets” of the Bay Area who viewed arts and literature as integrally connected to serving communities,¹¹ asked “Who are the poets?” In one stanza, he answered that they were the “penniless yet rich in spirit / who penned ‘power to the people!’ / ‘one struggle many fronts’ / ‘*makibaka! huwag matakot!*’ / ‘struggle! be not afraid!’” These phrases, drawn from the black power, antiwar, and anti-Marcos movements suggest that poetry can be a form of political action. The next stanza refers to those “who made ‘viva la huelga!’ / ‘remember attica! ‘mabuhay / ang masa! – the battlecry / and inspiration of oppressed / peoples everywhere” (21), and thus connects the United Farm Workers’ grape boycott and strike in California’s San Joaquin Valley, the uprising at the Attica prison in upstate New York, and the exclamation of radicals in the Philippines. According to Syquia, poetry binds together uprisings from Hanoi to Manila to Delano to New York to create a sense of global revolution.

As the first mass action in which Asian Americans participated together explicitly as Asian Americans, the TWLF strike at San Francisco State set the stage for the unfolding of the Asian American movement, and for the emergence of an autonomous, distinctive, and resistant Asian American literature. As the Japanese American poet Lawson Inada contended in “Amache Gate,” the actions that “*founded / Asian America / . . . / and closed down wars and colleges / and opened up souls and roads*” included artistic productions, cultural expressions, and political organizing. These actions tilled the soil in which Asian American literature grew and flourished. As Inada concluded, “The Revolution / not yet over / Asian America / just begun” (76–7).

Asian American Opposition to the Vietnam War

Opposition to the U.S. war in Vietnam contributed greatly to the emergence and growth of the Asian American movement, which was deeply influenced by some segments of the mainstream antiwar movement and also critiqued the racism of the larger movement. The antiwar movement brought together

groups and individuals who opposed the U.S. actions in Southeast Asia for a wide variety of reasons: pacifists (including religious objectors) decried the war for its violence in general; the mainstream movement focused on the loss of American soldiers and depicted the war as motivated by profit for the military industrial complex. Black power and Chicano activists protested the disproportionate number of black and brown casualties and drew connections between racism in the United States and disregard for Vietnamese lives.¹² Luis Valdez's insurgent theater group Teatro Campesino performed an example of the latter position in the play "Vietnam Campesino," which compares the killing of the peasants (campesinos) of Vietnam with the violence against striking farm workers in California.¹³ Similarly, the slogan "No Vietnamese ever called me nigger" exemplified black antiwar protesters' condemnation of the dual racisms of the war.¹⁴

The germinal Asian American groups AAPA in Berkeley and Asian Americans for Action (AAA, or Triple A) in New York City both materialized as offshoots of the antiwar movement. In Berkeley, where many Asian Americans were protesting individually against the war, Yuji Ichioka sought to magnify their presence by creating an Asian American group that would include members of all Asian ethnicities. To find progressive Asian Americans, in 1968 he and Emma Gee formed their new group by contacting all Asian surnamed members of an antiwar group, the Peace and Freedom Party. Early AAPA members were Chinese, Filipino, and Japanese Americans, immigrants and American-born alike, all dedicated to fighting racism in the United States and ending "the imperialistic policies being pursued by the American Government."¹⁵ In New York City, two older Nisei women with activist histories dating back to before World War II sought to create an organization for Asian Americans that would meld the political radicalism and racial pride exemplified in the black power movement. Kazu Iijima and Minn Masuda invited every Asian person they saw at antiwar rallies and demonstrations to the initial meeting of AAA in April 1969.¹⁶ Both AAPA and AAA thus formed by organizing individual Asian Americans who had been protesting the Vietnam War.

In an extension of the antiracist critique of the war, the Asian American movement based its opposition to the war on Asian solidarity, arguing that Asians in the United States should not stand idly by while their fellow Asians were being slaughtered in Vietnam. Asian American activists envisioned an intimate connection – a blood relationship – between themselves and their Southeast Asian compatriots. They performed this solidarity in the streets, on the page, and on the stage. Because of the unique nature of their analysis,

Asian Americans called out the racism of the mainstream movement and its inattention to the specifically anti-Asian nature of the war. At a massive antiwar rally in San Francisco on April 24, 1971 sponsored by the National Peace Action Coalition, Asian Americans joined other “Third World” activists angered at not being allowed to speak, stormed the stage, and took over the microphone. Patsy Chan critiqued racism in the United States and the war in Vietnam as integrally related. Having just returned from a conference that brought delegations of women from Laos, North Vietnam, and South Vietnam to share their experiences with women from the United States and Canada, Chan stated, “We, as Third World women [express] our militant solidarity with our brothers and sisters from Indochina. We, as Third World people know of the struggle the Indochinese are waging against imperialism, because we share that common enemy in the United States.” She concluded, “Yes, as we struggle here in our own jungle against imperialism and the racist monster, we will look continuously to our comrades in arms, the Indochinese, for their true revolutionary inspiration.”¹⁷ Although speeches at rallies are rarely read in literary ways, Chan’s description of the United States as “our own jungle” presents a powerful image linking Asian American resistance to domestic racism with Southeast Asian struggles for national liberation.

Asian Americans formed umbrella alliances that united existing groups to create a unified antiwar front. For example, the Bay Area Asian Coalition Against the War included staffers of the newspaper *Rodan* and members of I Wor Kuen, Wei Min She, the J-Town Collective, Kalayaan, and Asian American student organizations at San Francisco State, Berkeley, and other colleges and universities. In numerous antiwar rallies across the nation, Asian American protesters participated as “Asian contingents,” which united Asians of all ethnicities marching under the banners of Left Asia – the flags of the People’s Republic of China, North Korea, and North Vietnam. These multi-ethnic coalitions came together to protest the war, which in turn strengthened Asian American solidarity.

The folk trio A Grain of Sand provided the soundtrack to the Asian American movement. JoAnne “Nobuko” Miyamoto, Chris Iijima, and William “Charlie” Chin performed across the nation as traveling troubadours who set the anti-racist and antiimperialist politics of the Asian American movement to music. Their song “War of the Flea” evokes the metaphor of Vietnamese guerrilla warfare as that of the insignificant flea pestering its much more powerful opponent; this song goes beyond opposing the war, to actually declare solidarity with the Vietnamese people struggling against U.S. militarism.¹⁸

Asian American writers elaborated on the connection between the jungles of Southeast Asia and what Chan had called “our own jungle” in many ways. Poets like Janice Mirikitani and Brenda Paik Sunoo and playwrights including Philip Kan Gotanda and Melvyn Escueta similarly articulated the Asian American movement’s antiwar line of solidarity with fellow Asians. For example, as I have argued at length elsewhere, Escueta’s forgotten play “Honey Bucket” (1975) was the first major literary work to be written by an Asian American veteran of Vietnam and one of the first plays produced by the Asian American Theater Workshop in San Francisco. In it, Escueta establishes equivalencies between his protagonist, a Filipino American soldier named Andy, and the Vietnamese people. In the opening scene, a Vietnamese woman caresses Andy’s hair and points to her own: “Same-same, Viet me,” she concludes. The play ends with Andy going insane with guilt over having killed fellow Asians. “My country ‘tis of thee. Same-same, Viet-me. I was a gook killing gooks,” he laments.¹⁹ Andy’s use of the epithet “gook” to describe both the Vietnamese people and himself suggests that the racism that dehumanizes Vietnamese people and justifies their genocide in Asia also renders Asian Americans as racially oppressed in the United States.

Reports and correspondence from Asian American pilgrims who journeyed to Left Asia constitutes another archive of movement literature. Historian Judy Wu argues that travel to Asia provided a key way for U.S. activists to conceptualize and understand imperialism, racism, and sexism.²⁰ Pat Sumi and Alex Hing visited China, North Korea, and North Vietnam on a delegation led by Eldridge Cleaver, and *Gidra* staffer Evelyn Yoshimura toured China. Missives from these voyagers appeared in the Asian American movement press and should be read as travel literature rather than straight reportage. Although many of these reports contain *de rigueur*, formulaic praise for leaders such as Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh, they are worth reading for the passages that capture a palpable sense of optimism for the possibility of establishing a just and equal society.²¹

Yoshimura’s first article on her China journey sets up a narrative of progress based not on capitalism and individualistic consumerism, but on collective efforts. It begins by noting, “Less than a generation ago, the 750 million people of China wore rags” and draws a contrast to the simply, but effectively, dressed people of Shanghai who take pride in “knowing that through their labor, the people of China have become self-sustaining and self-reliant.”²² Yoshimura’s second article sets up another antinomy, this time between the stressful and chaotic Los Angeles commute, created by too many individual drivers, and the “gentle jingle of bicycle bells” in the

“streets of Peking, Canton, and Shanghai during rush hour.” The harmonious traffic flow symbolizes the spirit of cooperation that Yoshimura witnessed, which is founded in a shared ethic in which workers take pride in their productions under socialism.²³ Yoshimura also credited the abundance of food in China, in contrast to starvation before the communist revolution, to the system of communal agriculture. She concluded, “As it was in China, any great change begins and ends with people deciding to come together and make a change. It begins with you.”²⁴ These articles constitute parables of progress, all of them lauding the power of collective efforts. On her tour, Yoshimura was shielded from witnessing the ills of starvation and political persecution that accompanied the Cultural Revolution, and thus came away with a less than complete view of China. However, these parables bespeak the desire of Asian American radicals to build a less atomized society, one in which communities could produce their own health and well-being, and labor for themselves, in justice and with peace and harmony.

The Asian American movement also located the Vietnam War within a long history of specifically anti-Asian U.S. militarism. The movement argued that carnage wrought upon the Vietnamese people and their land could not be understood in isolation, but must be seen in the context of the conquest of the Philippines, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the ongoing occupations of the Philippines, Okinawa, and Korea. The atomic bombings struck a sensitive nerve, as they demonstrated how the United States consistently exhibited an utter disregard for Asian life. AAA commemorated the August 6 anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima by mounting demonstrations in 1969, 1970, and 1971. The influential Asian American newspaper *Gidra* published commemoration issues from 1970 to 1973, always connecting the nuclear annihilation of the Japanese people to the butchery of Vietnamese people, as evidenced by incidents such as the My Lai massacre. For example, an article entitled “Hiroshima-Nagasaki . . .” led readers to connect a third place name following the ellipsis by displaying photographs of scarred victims of the atomic bombings alongside victims of napalm bombings in Vietnam. The text included an extensive quotation from a *hibakusha* (atomic bombing survivor), who wrote movingly: “I was not killed with my hands tied behind my back and then thrown into the Mekong River in the same way as the [Vietnamese] people, but my youth was completely snatched away with the dropping of the A-bomb in Nagasaki twenty-seven years ago. . . . The people of Vietnam have arisen to save themselves, their homes and villages and the country which they love. So did I rise from the life of misery and distress and

determine to go on as a witness against war and A-bombs.” She concluded that the willingness of the United States to deploy nuclear bombs in Japan and napalm in Southeast Asia showed its callous disregard for Asian lives, and called upon Asian Americans to fight to ensure “that the nightmare of Hiroshima and Nagasaki will never again occur and the atrocities in Vietnam will forever be ceased.”²⁵

In the end, the Asian American movement’s conviction that the people of Vietnam universally supported unification under the Hanoi government was an overly simplistic view that was exposed in 1975 with the influx of South Vietnamese refugees fleeing to the United States following the fall of Saigon. Nevertheless, opposing genocide and imperialism in Southeast Asia aided the construction of the multiethnic, multinational Asian American coalition within the United States and the development of pan-ethnic Asian American literature.

Asian American Women

The liberation of women also proved to be an important and complex aspect of the Asian American movement’s struggle for self-determination for Asian communities and nations. On the one hand, Asian American women faced obstacles to attaining equality within movement organizations, despite the fact that nearly all Asian American radicals agreed that without women’s full empowerment and vice versa. In this way, Asian American women shared the experiences of their sisters in the black and Chicana/Chicano movements.²⁶ On the other hand, many women found vital opportunities within the movement to develop as leaders and grow both politically and personally. The scholar Laura Pulido argues that the Asian American group East Wind was “the most effective organization at challenging sexism and traditional gender roles” she studied in Los Angeles.²⁷ Most importantly, the struggle for Asian American women’s liberation occurred *within* the Asian American movement rather than existing in opposition to, or outside of it, because the Asian American women’s movement believed that racial and gender equality were absolutely inseparable.

Women confronted machismo and marginalization within the organizations that fought for Asian American empowerment. The San Francisco-based Red Guard Party, which was inspired by the Black Panther Party, performed a militant radicalism that overly emphasized masculinity as a tool for liberation. Although wearing dark glasses and Mao jackets and marching in martial order provided a powerful visual image that countered the stereotype of

Asian American submissiveness, doing so valorized an aggressive male militancy. As the Red Guard Party (which merged with the New York-based I Wor Kuen) developed more sophisticated ideas about social change, they eventually rejected the idea of armed struggle in favor of community organizing; this move must be seen not only as an ideological shift, but also as a change to the organization's gender politics. More generally, women found themselves relegated to doing the grunt work of organizing – typing up meeting minutes, serving coffee and food, and cleaning offices and communal living spaces. Linda Iwataki dramatized this pattern in a not-so-carefully disguised skit published in *Gidra*, about college students in an unnamed movement newspaper office. Two “brothers” glibly quote Mao and give lip service to the idea of women's liberation. However, when the group starts planning a conference, the men ignore the efforts of a “sister” to raise women's issues. Instead, they demand that she type an article and serve them coffee. “Thanks baby, you're a righteous sister,” they condescendingly call as they leave her alone to deal with all of the details of the upcoming event.²⁸ The skit thus critiques the sexism that allowed Asian American men to seize leadership roles, serve as public representatives of their organizations, and pontificate on theory, while silencing the women whose labor made the movement possible. Women also struggled against Asian American men who sought to control their bodies and sexualities. In the poem “from a lotus blossom cunt,” Tomi Tanaka raged against men who saw them only as “legit lay[s] for the revolutionary,” rather than equals.²⁹

Despite sexism within the movement, some women did occupy leadership positions in key Asian American organizations, including I Wor Kuen and the important Filipino group Katipunan ng mga Demokratikong Pilipino, better known as KDP. Furthermore, the movement provided spaces in which women could come together to discuss issues of racism and sexism, build sisterhood, and develop their leadership skills. For example, in Los Angeles, they created the group Asian Sisters, which focused on fighting drug abuse among Asian American young women,³⁰ and the Asian Women's Center, which provided child care, health care services, counseling, and educational programs.³¹ College classes focusing on Asian American women, taught within the programs opened in part through Asian American activism at places like UCLA, San Francisco State, and Berkeley, stressed that racism, sexism, and capitalism formed a “triple oppression,” with each part buttressing the others. Because they understood racism and sexism to be mutually reinforcing, the Asian American women's movement envisioned men as a vital part of their struggle for liberation, and consequently rejected the idea of forming a separate

movement. The members of the International Hotel Women's Collective, which emerged from the effort to save affordable housing for Filipino elders in San Francisco, took an archetypal stance toward the men in their struggle. Even as they protested against being patronized or objectified, they rejected the notion that they were "out to smash our men" and instead called upon men to "support us in our goals by building relationships of respect." Tellingly, they signed their letter, "With love, your sisters."³²

Asian American opposition to the Vietnam War paid special attention to how it affected women. The U.S. military consistently dehumanized Vietnamese people as gooks, but in particular many GIs objectified Vietnamese women as exotic and hypersexual. But rather than seeing Vietnamese women as hapless victims, the Asian American women's movement drew inspiration from their examples of revolutionary dedication. A widely circulated drawing, which appeared on the cover of the March 1970 issue of *Gidra*, portrays a barefoot Vietnamese peasant woman sitting on the ground. As she gazes resolutely into the distance, her left hand clutches a baby to her breast and her right hand drapes over an automatic rifle in her lap. The caption, which reads, "We will fight and fight from this generation to the next . . ." (ellipsis in original) underscores the sense of determination depicted in the drawing.³³ The image emblemizes an alternative Asian womanhood that could be nurturing and militant, simultaneously mothering a child and carrying out a rebellion. Refuting a problematic masculinity common among many radical organizations in the 1960s, which portrayed men as warriors and women as caretakers, this image argues that Asian women are revolutionaries in their own right. Asian American women also participated in two 1971 conferences in Canada that brought together North American and Vietnamese women for dialogue, both of which Judy Wu excavates in detail.³⁴ The participants came away with a deep appreciation for the intelligence and commitment of their Asian counterparts and resolved to renew their own dedication to fighting for justice.

Ramifications

Asian American literature has grown dramatically since the 1960s and 1970s, incorporating an ever-increasing diversity of authors, styles, topics, and perspectives, yet its origin as a committed form of writing continues to have ramifications for the field. As I have argued, the social and political movements of the 1960s and 1970s created spaces in which multiethnic Asian American arts, culture, and literature arose as a distinct body of works. Conversely, Asian

American writing also strengthened a sense of multiethnic solidarity among movement activists, participants, and supporters. Reading the broader archive of movement writing alongside more traditional literary forms such as drama and poetry reveals the centrality of opposition to the interlinked forces of racism, imperialism, and sexism to the creation of Asian American literature. Today, Asian American literature continues to explore themes raised by Asian American participation in the fight for ethnic studies, opposition to the Vietnam War, and struggle for women's liberation.

Many recent and contemporary examples of Asian American literature – as well as literary works recovered from the early and mid-twentieth century – examine the place of Asian Americans within a multiracial U.S. society, the enduring effects of militarism in Asia, racial and gender inequality, and the meaning of diaspora and national crossings. The novels of Korean American Chang-Rae Lee explore the Asian immigrant experience in a dizzyingly diverse New York City and the aftereffects of war in the Pacific, bridging history and present, Asia and America, to conclude that the past is never dead and over there is always connected to over here. Dramatist Velina Hasu Houston gives voice to multiracial Asian Americans who explore the racial frontiers within themselves. In short stories and novels, Jhumpa Lahiri examines how diasporic migrations produce cultural intertwinings and complex identities for South Asians. The recovery of early twentieth century, biracial writer Sui Sin Far speaks to the importance that Asian American critics have placed on women's literary production. Jessica Hagedorn's best-known novel *Dogeaters* explores gender, sexuality, and political activism in the Philippines during Ferdinand Marcos's reign of martial law. Joy Kogawa's work highlights the perseverance and strength of Japanese Canadian women during World War II. Vietnamese American memoirist Andrew Lam traces refugee experiences, the exigencies of displacement caused by the war in Indochina, and the search for a sense of home. These Asian American authors and many more like them, along with literary critics who study their works, produce Asian American literature as a field that continues to be concerned with the issues that were present at its birth: racial equality, gender equity, and transnational crossings.

Notes

- 1 On the Asian American movement, see Daryl Maeda, *Rethinking the Asian American Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2012) and *Chains of Babylon: The Rise of Asian America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Michael Liu, Kim Geron, and Tracy Lai, *The Snake Dance of Asian American Activism: Community, Vision, and Power*

- (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008); William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993).
- 2 See, among others, Elaine Kim, "'Such Opposite Creatures': Men and Women in Asian American Literature," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 39.1 (Winter 1990): 68–93.
- 3 This would not remain the case after the Immigration Act of 1965, which ended Asian exclusion and led to a dramatic increase in Asian immigration. However, the full impact of the 1965 reforms would not be felt for decades. See Bill Ong Hing, *Making and Remaking Asian America through Immigration Policy, 1850–1990* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).
- 4 Robert G. Lee, "The Cold War Construction of the Model Minority Myth," in *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader*, ed. Min Zhou and James V. Gatewood, 2nd ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 469–84.
- 5 To be clear, the model minority myth of Asian Americans acquiescence was not true, for Asian American history is replete with examples of organized resistance to racism, discrimination, and exploitation.
- 6 Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).
- 7 For an introduction to the sprawling diversity of the black power movement, see Peniel Joseph, *Waiting 'til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power* (New York: Holt, 2007).
- 8 Karen Umemoto, "'On Strike!' San Francisco State College Strike, 1968–69: The Role of Asian American Students," *Amerasia Journal* 15.1 (1989): 3–41.
- 9 William Barlow and Peter Shapiro, *An End to Silence: The San Francisco State Student Movement in the 60s* (New York: Pegasus, 1971).
- 10 Janice Mirikitani, ed., *Time to Greez! Incantations from the Third World* (San Francisco: Glide Memorial/Third World Communications, 1975).
- 11 Theodore S. Gonzalves, *The Day the Dancers Stayed: Performing in the Filipino/American Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 23–4.
- 12 Tom Wells provides an overview of the mainstream antiwar movement in *The War Within: America's Battle over Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). Simon Hall discusses the relationship between the civil rights and antiwar movements in *Peace and Freedom: The Civil Rights and Antiwar Movements in the 1960s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006). On the Chicano antiwar movement, see Lorena Oropeza, *!Raza Si!!Guerra No!: Chicano Protest and Patriotism during the Viet Nam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) and George Mariscal, *Aztlán and Viet Nam: Chicano and Chicana Experiences of the War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
- 13 Oropeza, *!Raza Si!*, 101–2.
- 14 Sylvia Chong, *The Oriental Obscene: Violence and Racial Fantasies in the Vietnam Era* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 64–70.
- 15 Maeda, *Rethinking the Asian American Movement*, 9–11.
- 16 On AAA, see *ibid.*, 12–14.
- 17 Patsy Chan, "United Third World People Demand: End Your Racist War," *Gidra* (June 1971): 5; Maeda, *Chains of Babylon*, 123.
- 18 Maeda, *Chains of Babylon*, 148.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 118.

- 20 Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, *Radicals on the Road* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).
- 21 For more detailed discussions of these international pilgrimages, see Wu, *Radicals on the Road* and Maeda, *Rethinking the Asian American Movement*, 120–6.
- 22 Evelyn Yoshimura, “China: Not Enough Can Be Said About So Much,” *Gidra* (November 1972): 6–7.
- 23 Evelyn Yoshimura, untitled, *Gidra* (December 1972): 10–11.
- 24 Evelyn Yoshimura, “Food Price: Let Them Eat Less, or China: Food for Everyone,” *Gidra* (May 1973): 14.
- 25 Mike Murase, “Hiroshima-Nagasaki . . .,” *Gidra* (August 1972): 4–5.
- 26 Laura Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow and Left: Radical Activism in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 180–214.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 180.
- 28 Daryl J. Maeda, “The Asian American Movement,” in *Speaking Out: Activism and Protest in the 1960s and 1970s*, ed. Heather Ann Thompson (New York: Prentice Hall, 2009), 83–92.
- 29 Tomi Tanaka, “From a lotus blossom cunt,” *Gidra* (July 1971): 114.
- 30 May Fu, “‘Serve the People and You Help Yourself’: Japanese-American Anti-Drug Organizing in Los Angeles, 1969 to 1972,” *Social Justice* 35.2 (2008): 80–99.
- 31 Wei, *Asian American Movement*, 79–80.
- 32 International Hotel Women’s Collective, “Sisterhood Is Powerful,” in *Asian Women* (Berkeley, CA: International Hotel Women’s Collective, 1971), 122–4.
- 33 *Gidra* (March 1970).
- 34 Wu, *Radicals on the Road*, chs. 8 and 9.

The Art of the Asian American Movement's Social Protest Performance

LUCY MAE SAN PABLO BURNS

In the midst of all of this, it was a tremendous amount of fun.

Chris Iijima of *A Grain of Sand* (*Conversations*, 2010)¹

“Serve the People! Organize!” These are slogans identified with the Asian American political movement of the 1970s in the United States. While the movement sought to assert racial equality and social justice for people of Asian descent living in the United States, and indeed for all people of color, it equally called for the end of U.S. imperial aggression in Southeast Asia (anti-Vietnam War, and anti-U.S. military occupation of the Philippines and Hawai‘i). Political movements like the Asian American movement imagine different life-worlds in which their work founded possibilities for a life not yet realized and a reality not yet present. Cultural workers and the arts thus played a central role within such movements where the imaginative labors of artists lay the groundwork for new worlds to come.

This chapter explores the centrality of such artistic contributions to the Asian American movement through the work of the musical trio *A Grain of Sand* and the theater work of Sining Bayan. I approach these cultural productions as complex artistic processes, and as active gestures toward imagining other worlds. I turn first to the performances of *A Grain of Sand* (also known as *Yellow Pearl* and as Joanne, Chris, and Charlie) who sang about their “people’s plight in America.”² *A Grain of Sand* voiced the politics of racial and class solidarity musically through their performance of Asian Americans as ordinary Americans. Second, I focus on Sining Bayan, the cultural arm of the Filipino political group *Katipunan ng mga Demokratikong Pilipino*/Union of Democratic Filipinos, to foreground the transnational politics undergirding the Asian American movement. It is the labor of such creative expressions within political movements that centrally animates this chapter. The complexity of movement art lies not merely in its imaginative stagings of ideology, but also in its own aesthetics of creation. The music, plays, and performances of

A Grain of Sand and Sining Bayan are thus scripts that joyfully prepare us for exuberant futurities that we continue to see in various contemporary theater and performance projects by Asian Americans.

Analyzing Performances of and for Protest

This chapter focuses on what Harry Elam has termed “social protest theater” – “uses of performances as a means to articulate social causes, to galvanize support and direct sympathizers toward campaigns of political resistance” (Elam 1997, 3).³ Elam’s theory of social protest theater highlights theater as an interdisciplinary art form. It opens up the possibility of decentralizing the written text that dramatic literature privileges. Plays by Asian American playwrights such as Jessica Hagedorn, Frank Chin, Velina Hasu Houston, Philip Kan Gotanda, Jeannie Barroga, David Henry Hwang, Chay Yew, Alice Tuan, and others have fundamentally altered American theater, challenging how race has been understood within this American cultural institution. Looking at A Grain of Sand’s and Sining Bayan’s political performances provides an opportunity to analyze movement art beyond the written text to foreground movement art as a social experience, a form of interaction between people, text, sound, and space.

Understanding the labor of A Grain of Sand’s music and Sining Bayan’s theater works requires an analytical framework that accounts for their artistic complexity. Common perceptions of protest art often (facilely) describe it through idioms of spontaneity, instinct, and agitation. While those perceptions resonate, they often reduce protest art to opportunistic labor devoid of aesthetic nuance. Protest art is rarely recognized, for example, as meticulously planned, skillfully crafted, and joyfully performed. A Grain of Sand and Sining Bayan dedicated their artistic training and craft to create cultural works that speak to the experiences of Asians in America. With this art, they sought to embody and give voice to “those struggling to find a voice outside the system,” says Chris Iijima.⁴ Iijima’s search for and expression of a voice is about a politicized collective social identity committed to change and challenging structures of power, not simply an individual process of self-enlightenment and self-realization compatible and comfortable with the status quo. Elam’s notion of social protest theater and Maria Josephine Barrios’s *dulang panlansangan* offer useful theoretical frameworks as their varying sites of protest art render this practice as a complex, deliberate, and intricate undertaking (“The Taumbayan As Epic Hero, the Audience as Community,” 1998).⁵ In *Taking It to the Streets*, Elam argues that to grasp the art of social protest theater, the

following must be considered: “the social conditions that affect the performance; the content and form of the social protest play text; the performance space and elements of performance and staging; the role of social performers and the audience” (17). Elam developed this theory of social movement art through his comparative study of the Chicano social protest theater *El Teatro Campesino* and the Black Revolutionary Theater, situating them respectively within the rise of the *La Raza* movement and the black power movement. This critical approach to the genre of social protest performance deviates from strict analyses of literary and production values. Sociopolitical conditions as constitutive of the meaning, significance, and power of social protest performances are thus key to understanding the Asian American movement's cultural production. Barrios and Elam draw from Bertolt Brecht, Augusto Boal, and others. Barrios and Elam expand political theater scholarship through their discussion of race and vernacularized and localized theories of political theater.

In *Tungo sa Estetika ng Dulaang Panlansangan* (Towards an Aesthetics of Street Theater), Maria Josephine Barrios names the characteristics of *dulang panlansangan* (street theater):

Karanasan mula sa langganan, ng mga mamayan sa lipunan; ipanapalabas sa mga di-pangkaraniwang istrukturang pangtanghai; tumatalakay sa mga suliranin, isyu at pakibaka ng taumbayan (1994,1).⁶

[Translation: Street theater depicts life of the people on the streets; is shown in nontraditional theatrical venues; and tackles problems, issues, and struggles of the masses.]

Barrios focuses on the protest performances at the dawn and dusk of martial law in the Philippines (1972–81). Strict control of the public sphere had Filipino artists seeking alternative ways to protest the dictatorial rule of the country. Though political art took a toll, cultural workers creatively used their immediate surroundings and political situation as conditions of possibility, despite consequences that included incarceration, detention, and death. For Barrios, “street plays are rituals affirming the belief in victory, the destruction of the present social order and the birth of a new society characterized by freedom and equality.”⁷

Much like Elam's differentiation of social protest theater and the mainstream theater establishment, Barrios equally insists on distinguishing aesthetic values between *dulang panlansangan* and *lehitimong dula* (legitimate play). A study of *dulang panlansangan* as Barrios argues, makes necessary the study of Philippine performance traditions and Philippine social context. For

Barrios, the aesthetics of *dulang panlansangan* falls within the continuum of Philippine performance traditions beyond the formal stage. She writes:

*Ang mga ritwal, sayaw, at awit halimbawa, ng ating mga ninuno at maging mga tradisyunal na komunidad sa kasalukuyan ay isinasagawa sa mga bahay, bakuran, tabing-ilog, tabing-dagat, palayan, at parang.*⁸

[Translation: The rituals, dances, and songs of our ancestors became community traditions that take place at home, the yard, by the river, by the sea, in the rice fields, and in the countryside.]

The blurring of performer and audience is critical to social protest theater and *dulang panlansangan*, where such deliberate boundary crossings emphasize the participatory nature of these practices. Both authors draw from the notion of ritual as performance/performance as ritual to, as Elam writes, “determine the oppositional power and aesthetic achievements” of social protest theater and *dulang panlansangan*.⁹ Elam arrives at such a formulation through the work of the anthropologists Victor Turner (1967, 1968, 1982) and Jean and John Comaroff (1993, 1985). Turner and the Comaroffs theorize rituals as “symbolic acts” and as “‘signifying practice’ that defines and authorizes social action.”¹⁰ Barrios, however, recalls precolonial ritual practices as performances serving community needs. Her discussion of rituals as performances in the precolonial Philippines underscores the role of colonial forces in interrupting and suppressing these kinds of communal practices.

For Barrios and Elam ritual transcends conventional theater, overcoming for instance the divide between performer and audience. For Elam and Barrios, this alternative view and practice of performance moves literal action to the symbolic realm. Therefore, performances are not spectacles simply to be consumed in the present. Rather, action in social protest theater and *dulang panlansangan* suggests a relationship to meaning beyond the literal, time beyond the present, and the performance event as a shared experience toward a collective formation.

A Grain of Sand: The Politics and Performance of Asian Americans as Ordinary Americans

The song begins with a wind instrument, establishing notes that create sounds associated with Asian folk music. At forty seconds, sounds transition to those of string and percussion instruments, transforming what we hear as descriptively popular American folk music of the 1960s. This musical tradition was

specifically identified with the peace movement of the 1960s. After one minute, the singing commences with the following words:

Nosotros somos Asiaticos,
y nos gustas cantar para la gente.
Hablamos la misma lengua
porque luchamos por las mismas cosas.

Somos Asiaticos introduces Asians in America to Spanish speakers, specifically to express their shared struggle against white racism and capitalism, and their anti-American imperialist politics. Sung by Joanne Nobuko Miyamoto, Chris Iijima, and Charlie Chin, this song appears in the historic album *A Grain of Sand: Songs for the Struggle by Asians in America* first released in 1973 and reissued, with the classification of “folk classic,” in 1998. *Somos Asiaticos* emerged from the singers’ involvement in transforming an old, abandoned storefront into an Asian American multiservice community center named Chickens Come Home to Roost. This storefront in the Westside of New York City, named after a speech by Malcolm X, was a center that drew Asian Americans, Puerto Ricans, other Latinos, and blacks. Reoccupation of this space was part of the practice of the squatters movement.¹¹ As noted in the group’s recording *A Grain of Sand* album liner, the Spanish speakers that Chris and Joanne met and worked with at the community center helped them compose the lyrics for the song.¹²

The group began as a duo, Joanne and Chris, crossing paths through their involvement with various activist movements in New York City, where they first met attending an Asian Americans for Action meeting. Not long after, Charlie Chin joined them to make up what is now known as A Grain of Sand.¹³ The time was the early 1970s and the vibe was antiracist, antiimperialist, and anticapitalist. It was a time to dream of revolutions. And the mood, according to Chris Iijima, was “fun.” As Iijima puts it: “When your life is changing, when your values are changing, when things are alive and vibrating, and popping up all over the place, being a part of that is just fun. . . . It was where things were happening. It was where the party was.”¹⁴

Both Elam and Barrios place emphasis on “the performance space and elements of performance and staging” in theorizing cultural production that emerge in political movements. In keeping with the idea of music for the people and of the movement, Joanne, Chris, and Charlie’s performing aesthetic is of particular significance.¹⁵ From photographs and recordings of their performances, one sees that they did not don extraordinary costumes or sing in front of elaborate stage designs. Neither did they employ complicated movement or

choreography. Amplified by a mic on a stand, Joanne primarily performed with her voice, while Chris and Charlie sang with her, playing their guitars, sometimes sitting on a stool. They insisted on a performance aesthetics that was devoid of spectacularity. In doing so, their performances featured their vocals and acoustic instruments. The musical instruments they used to create their sounds include a guitar, maracas, flute, and conga drums. They comment on their choice of acoustic instruments and not electric: "We want to be mobile. We want to be ready anywhere anytime." Though they expressed desire to expand musically, their "political priorities many times will dictate the form one chooses."¹⁶

Somos Asiaticos enacts the politics that the musical trio performs in their artistic persona. They identified as musicians of the movement, who felt that to be artists of the movement they must be *in* the movement. Their songs come from their experiences within Asian American progressive organizing – building a multiracial coalition, participating in community political education, advocating for relevant education at colleges and universities, and providing social service support to low income earning members of the community. This work for social change asserted ethnic identities not just for the sake of ethno-racial pride, but to establish a connection with others through histories of shared struggle. For Chris, it was "about getting voice, helping people get voice. Community of progressive people, if being Asian helps, that's great. It's not about what is the Asian American car." *Somos Asiaticos*, with its simple lyrics, reaches out – "Yo para tu gente / tu para la mia."¹⁷ (Translation: Me for your people, you for mine.)

Joanne describes the musical group as the griot or troubadour of the Asian American movement.¹⁸ Other songs in the album include *We Are the Children* and *Wandering Chinaman*. Along with *Somos Asiaticos*, these songs introduce the collective story of Asians in America – as migrants who were brought to the United States to build the nation: "We are the children of the migrant workers / we are the offspring of the concentration camps / sons and daughters of the railroad builder / who leave their stamp on Amerika."¹⁹ The lyrics of *We Are the Children* explain the presence of Asians in America, those who first came and became the Japanese gardener, the Chinese launderer, and the Filipino field worker. Joanne, Chris, and Charlie sing this song from the point of view of the children of these workers, explaining that Asians have become part of America through their labor and their offsprings. Asian Americans are equally part of America for being targets of U.S. racist policies, such as Executive Order 9066 which classified Japanese Americans as enemy aliens who by virtue of their ethnicity were already presumed to be loyal to Japan at war with the United States.

Yet, they are ordinary Americans. As the song continues, the following phrases playfully introduce Asian Americans: "Foster children of the Pepsi Generation / Cowboys and Indians – ride, red-man, ride!/ Watching war movies with the next door neighbor / Secretly rooting for the other side."²⁰ Asian Americans, in this song, claim belonging to the Pepsi Generation, growing up consuming and consumed by the imperial capitalism of corporate culture so identified with America. Equally consuming and consumed by cowboy and Indian narratives, they "secretly root" for American Indians in the epic battle that founds the mythology of the U.S. nation-state. This attention to the complexity of Asian Americans insists on their complicity with the formation of an imperialist nation. The song's lyrics foreground an Americanness that confronts the incommensurability of their "Asian" bodies with their Americanness – cola drinking, Cowboys and Indians playing, folk singing, long-hair wearing, and out-spoken, openly demonstrating against their government. In other words, Asian Americans are the prime embodiment of U.S. democracy. In doing so, the song models an imaginary of living in the belly of the beast, so to speak, that offers the possibility of refusing the totality of U.S. empire.²¹

A Grain of Sand's ordinary looks relies on misperceptions of Asian Americans: the contrast of their "foreign" looks juxtaposed alongside the familiarity of their American ways. Their performance style does not draw attention to itself, it does not comment on itself in the act of the performance. For instance, the members of A Grain in the Sand do not sing in broken English, don foreign accents, or wear costumes associated with their Asian ancestry only to shed and reveal their "real" (American) selves. They forego the prosthetics of "Asianness," refusing the performance method of yellow facing. Many have argued toward a critical understanding of yellow face, especially when deployed by Asian and Asian American performers, as methodologically exposing dominant ideologies of Orientalism in the history of Western performance.²² Their nonuse of such a method could also be read as a performative choice to blur their proximity to Orientalist perceptions of Asian and Asian Americans. Whether in disguise and adorned with props or not, racist perceptions of Asians and Asian Americans in performance are always already perceived through such an Orientalist lens.

A Grain of Sand's performance of "ordinariness" adheres to the politics of empowering the common person, their presumed primary audience. Unlike the spectacle of Asian Americans as "ordinary Americans" exemplified in the *Flower Drum Song*, A Grain of Sand casts Asian Americans' ordinariness as Americans emerging within histories of racism, U.S. imperialism, and capitalism.²³ A Grain of Sand foregrounds protest and resistance to the

U.S. government as the constitutive content of their Americanness. They shift the defining tension at the core of Asian American identity away from reifying cultural differences and toward American ethno-centrism and racism.

I began my discussion of A Grain of Sand describing the sounds of *Somos Asiaticos*. Their recorded album drew from various musical traditions – American rock, Latin, and jazz music. Their musical philosophy cites the Experimental Sound Collective of I.C.A.I.C. (Cuban Institute of Cinematic Arts and Industries) and musicians Pepe y Flora who were involved with the Puerto Rican Liberation Movement. *Somos Asiaticos* was released in Puerto Rico, first recorded for a Puerto Rican record company, and was performed in Spanish-speaking events including the Puerto Rican Liberation Day in Madison Garden in 1974. Their musical inspiration and identity is squarely within American popular music. They did not crucially cite musical influences from Asia. Oliver Wang writes: “Their music was firmly situated within a familiar American musical idiom – folk – lending to it a certain identity politics based on music genre alone. . . . A Grain of Sand’s arrangements and harmonies were clearly influenced and inspired by the works of popular folk artists such as the Kingston Trio and the Weavers. But folk music, as a genre, had already waned considerably in popularity by the mid-1960s.”²⁴ The group performed in a range of spaces – the Madison Square gardens, rooftops, on the streets, at protest sites, at political rallies, in windows, on makeshift stages, and in colleges. In 1972, Chris and Joanne were introduced by John Lennon and Yoko Ono as guests on *The Mike Douglas Show*.

A Grain of Sand’s performance of Asian American as ordinary American is a radical reembodyment of Americanness. Their aesthetics requires a rethinking of the ordinary, common people, of their daily acts as extraordinary feats of survival. As writer Charles Bernstein writes, “The ordinary is always a contested ground.”²⁵ A Grain of Sand capaciously rendered who and what an American is. In the following section, I focus on the internationalist politics of Sining Bayan’s political plays to underscore the progressive transnational political practice at work in Asian American movement art. Like A Grain of Sand, this theater group centered the common people as the true actors in the impending revolution.

Transnational Imaginary in the Sining Bayan’s Protest Theater

The theater of Sining Bayan puts in focus how theater constituted political action for organizing against President Ferdinand Marcos’s martial law. From

1973 to 1981, Sining Bayan was the artistic voice of the radical politics of the KDP/the *Katipunan ng mga Demokratikong Pilipino* in the United States.²⁶ This cultural group's involvement in the antimartial law and anti-Marcos movement is an example of how Asian diasporic communities' progressive political identity remained connected to concerns in Asia. This group's close ties to the progressive cultural movement in the Philippines testifies to how culture was the battle ground on which the martial law was fought, and that artists were at the front lines of Marcos's war against the people.

Sining Bayan primarily staged plays about the struggles of Filipino people, reflecting a two-pronged political agenda: support for the struggle for a socialist alternative in the United States and support for the national democratic struggle against repressive rule in the Philippines.²⁷ Such a multipronged approach linked antiracism and struggles against a neocolonial repressive state, an inventive approach made both necessary and possible by Sining Bayan's diasporic location and affiliation. Sining Bayan's plays grappled with the lives of the *manongs* (*Isuda ti Imuna*/Those Who Came First), a generation of men who came as migrant workers to the United States in the 1920s and 1930s, as well as Filipina war brides who came a generation later (*Warbrides*).²⁸ The plays variously focus on the brutality of capitalism on the Filipino laboring body, situating this violence within the enduring context of U.S.-Philippine colonial relations. Members of Sining Bayan were U.S.-born Filipinos, Philippine-born Filipinos, other Asian Americans, students, workers, and recent immigrants. They conducted oral interviews with early migrant workers, some of whom were their families, that served as dramaturgical sources for these productions. Sining Bayan also produced adaptations of Filipino plays and scripts to focus on the land rights struggle of Muslims and farmers in the Southern Philippines (*Mindanao*) and Filipino peasant workers (*Sakada*). Their last production was *Ti Mangyuna* (Those Who Led the Way), a play about the 1937 multiethnic labor organizing in Hawai'i.²⁹ While each play presented the stark reality of physical and systemic violence against Filipinos in the United States and the Philippines, each also celebrated the power of collective struggle against oppressive forces. Sining Bayan's plays presented clear criticisms, pointed to the focus on protest, enacted proposed tactics of action, and affirmed who the agents of change are.

In 1972, Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law through Proclamation 1081, centralizing government power in his hands, suspending civil rights, and executing force of law through military rule. Marcos's justifications were numerous, including communist threat and oligarchy, but the foremost threat that brought him to this decision was an alleged assassination attempt against

the life of his defense minister Juan Ponce Enrile. For Marcos, such attempts demonstrated the growing threat of dissenters, those “whose political, social, economic, legal and moral precepts are based on the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist teachings and beliefs.”³⁰ Students, journalists, political leaders, and workers from various sectors who voiced opposition to the increase of policing and criminalization of dissent became targets of routinized state disciplinary actions. A culture of silence and repression became the everyday practice of life, as citizen-subjects struggled to find forms of freedom within and without such constraints.

This culture of repression imposed during martial law thus makes particularly critical the labor of Sining Bayan and other activist efforts in the Filipino diaspora in the United States and beyond. Antimartial law activism in the diaspora sustained the flow of information, acquired through close ties with the oppositional movement in the Philippines and through alternative media outlets. Activists Madge Bello and Vince Reyes acknowledged antimartial law/anti-Marcos political work in the United States as “‘keeping the light of resistance’ aflame” by maintaining the flow of information to and from the Philippines, and to the American public, especially in the early years of martial law when repression in the Philippines had silenced democratic forces.³¹ Sining Bayan’s cultural work was undeniably central to creating a counter and oppositional worldview to martial law. Activists mobilized cultural production in multiple ways: to oppose and counter the suppression of the freedom of the press; to inform, through alternative means, the public of the government’s use of excessive force – disappearances, detentions, and killings – as its disciplining measures; to inspire reflection and action amongst the disempowered; and to offer visions of alternative social relations.

To do so, Sining Bayan demystified arts as transcendent of politics. They argued for an understanding of cultural production as central to the *maintenance, naturalization, and ultimate desirability* of authoritarian rule. Understanding the extent of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos’s deft use of the arts in implementing their vision of “*Kilusan na Bagong Lipunan*/ Movement towards a New Society” gives us deeper insights on cultural activism in Filipino diaspora. Under this New Society, “Philippine culture” would become visible as modern to the world at large. The Marcoses brought to the Philippines world-renowned artistic companies, including the San Francisco Ballet, Boston Opera, and the London Symphony. They hosted events such as the 1974 Miss Universe Beauty Pageant and the 1982 Manila International Film Festival. While the Marcos’s agenda valorized Euro-American cultural domination, Nicanor Tiongson also argues that the Marcos regime “consciously cultivated an image of itself as the

patron of nationalist culture” with events such as *Kasaysayan ng Lahi* (the history of the Philippine nation and Filipino people by way of massive parade), *Bagong Anyo*/ New Year fashion shows featuring contemporary designs of Filipino national costumes such as the *terno* and the *Maria Clara*, the Metro Manila Popular Music Festival that yielded musical talents including Freddie Aguilar, and the National Artist Awards program. These “State Propaganda” cultural productions, as termed by Bien Lumbera, were designed to promote the values of New Society – reformed, modern, and, as coined by Marcos himself, truly a “revolution from the top.”³² Yet, for many, “New Society” meant newer forms of terror, violence, fear, torture, and threat. To be sure, artists and journalists were targets of disciplinary, repressive, and punitive measures under the martial law. Such a mobilization of the arts as precisely the mode through which the Marcos regime sedimented itself as desirable, modern, and even fashionable, provokes a closer analysis of Sining Bayan’s mobilization of theater to organize a radical Filipino America.

For Sining Bayan, the Philippines was more than a locus of one’s ethnic origins but rather the origin of political consciousness and struggle, and a source of complex significance in the cultural imagination of Filipino Americans. The multiple manifestations of the Philippines in Sining Bayan’s dramatic imagination produce the Philippines – its struggles, its traditions, its politics – as a site on which the racial and class formation of the Filipino Americans, during this particular time, is realized. The Philippines appears as a setting, a place from where the *manongs* and *manangs* of these plays come. The Philippines is also the place where they go back to, when they can no longer work in America, in order to reap the benefits of their back-breaking labor. The Philippines, in a gendered representation, also takes the form of a loyal wife, girlfriend, mother, left behind, waiting for them to retire, where the *manongs* will finally be taken care of. It is in the colorful costumes, the multilingual dialogues, the music, and the choreographed movements of the plays.

To elaborate on how the Philippines served as an aesthetic inspiration for Sining Bayan, I will discuss the group’s production of *Mindanao*. *Mindanao* is based on Philippine-located theater artists Malou Jacob’s and Franklin Osorio’s play *Ai’dao*. It dramatizes the struggle for land by Moros (ethnic Muslims) and poor Christian farmers of the Southern Philippines. *Mindanao* shows their shared fight to save their farm and ancestral land. It imagines a coming together of these two peoples; quite the opposite to their longtime battles depicted and immortalized in the *moro moro komedyas* (a popular performance tradition in the Philippines dating back to the Spanish colonial period). In Sining Bayan’s *Mindanao*, Moros and Christians are allies against the corrupt

local government and foreign investors supported by the Marcos regime. The hope lies in the struggle of the exploited and oppressed poor farmers and landowners, as the joint struggle against outsiders transcends their cultural differences. This play in particular raises questions of what is lost and gained in privileging class identity over cultural identity.

Sining Bayan's *Mindanao* incorporated a Southern Philippines musical tradition, a brass gong instrument called *kulintang*. According to Vinluan, this show introduced the "first ever Kunlintang music ensemble in the U.S." She states, "Young Fil-Am rock, jazz, and salsa musicians had never heard, let alone set eyes on a set of kulintang gongs. The experience was a phenomenal cultural awakening to pre-Hispanic, native Filipino music and culture to not only these musicians but appreciative Filipinos and non-Filipinos in the audience."³³ Robert Kikuchi, an ex-KDP and Sining Bayan member who is the founding artistic director of the Bay Area California Asian American performance group Eth-Noh-Tec:

One of the most significant things that came out of my work with Sining Bayan was my introduction to Kulintang music. Back in 1978, when Ermena Vinluan asked me to compose music for the play, she said "We want you to use the indigenous music of Mindanao called 'Kulintang'" My answer reply was "What is Kulintang?" I had only been vaguely familiar with the music through early and inaccurate recordings of gong music that I heard in my childhood.

...

As a result of being involved with Sining Bayan and the subsequent introduction to Kulintang music, it launched and provided the groundswell for the Filipino American community to become aware of this indigenous music.³⁴

This particular endeavor, however, went beyond yet another consumption of the "many cultures" of the Philippines. *Kulintang* was used in a production about the marginality and oppression of Muslims in the Philippines. Traditional Muslim clothing and dances were already parts of Filipino American gatherings, showcased amongst other tribal and indigenous cultures of the Philippines. Sining Bayan placed *kulintang* in the context of Muslim struggle against years of exploitation and marginalization. Unlike other intercultural or multicultural projects, Sining Bayan's intracultural intervention in this production did not isolate *kulintang* from its regional and political context. In *Mindanao*, *kulintang* was heard as it would in the daily lives of the people of the region, not as another featured example that glorifies a culturally diverse Philippines.

In their search for a revolutionary form, Sining Bayan looked to performance methodologies and traditions from the Philippines. "The Philippines" has multiple significations in Sining Bayan's theatrical imaginary: a metaphor for the struggles of Filipinos in the world, a cause for revolution, and an inspiration for a changed future. Yet the group's relationship to the struggles of the Filipino people was equally grounded on the realities of the violence of martial law, the dislocation of political exiles (forced and voluntary), the exploitation of immigrants of color in the United States, the forgotten history of U.S. empire, and the shared struggle of U.S. people of color against racism. The politics and artistic practice of Sining Bayan was an alternative to and a critique of the cultural nationalism of the Marcos regime.

Muscles of the Imagination: Toward a Recognition of Movement Art

A focus on performance moves us away from merely quantitative measures of social change to aesthetics beyond the written text, and to a necessary engagement of the politics of embodiment. Such a reading of performance as insistent, transformative, and ultimately imaginative. Alisa Solomon writes, "Artists keep us exercising the muscles of the imagination."³⁵ "Rehearsals for revolution," coined by Augusto Boal, or "scenarios for revolution" by T.V. Reed, suggest that social change does not happen overnight, but is rather a series of acts/rehearsals leading us to transformation.³⁶ Eugene Van Erven's "playful revolution" suggests the risk taking necessary to realize a new society. It also reminds us that playing can lead to creative ways toward amending everyday life, experiencing change, as Iijima reminds us, is "a tremendous amount of fun."

The oppositional politics through artistic expression in Asian American theater and performance can be found in contemporary projects. Joanne established her own dance theater company, Great Leap, in Santa Monica, California, where she remains committed to arts as a political expression. Joanne worked closely with and is attributed by the first Vietnamese American Theater troupe Club O'Noodles (based in Southern California) as instrumental in their formation.³⁷ More recently, Great Leap has been creating performance ensemble work concerning practices of sustainability.³⁸

A number of other theater artists who have claimed influence from Nobuko Miyamoto and A Grain of Sand's artistic work. Roberta Uno, former artistic director of theater company New WORLD Theater in Amherst, Massachusetts, recognizes Nobuko Miyamoto and the work of A Grain of

Sand as having an influence on her theater's commitment to community-based theater. Uno is as a director, a researcher, an archivist, and a foundation program officer who has advanced Asian American theater through the New WORLD Theater company, the Uno Collection of Plays by Asian American Women (housed at the UMass W.E.B. DuBois Library), and her various edited collections including *UnBroken Thread: An Anthology of Plays by Asian American Women*. Leilani Chan, artistic director of the multiracial company TeAda Productions in Southern California, has worked with Miyamoto and Uno early in her theater career. TeAda Productions has continued A Grain of Sand's commitment to arts and performance as an expression for those underrepresented in the political system. Using methods such as interviews and talk story, Chan has created theater works focusing on Lao people's experiences in the United States as refugees titled *Refugee Nation*. More recently, Chan's TeAda Production is developing a project titled *Global Taxi Drivers*, foregrounding the experiences of taxi drivers who are predominantly immigrants and men of color. *Global Taxi Drivers* brings together multiracial theater artists, immigrant labor organizers, and transportation rights activists to present taxi drivers beyond their identity as laborers in changing social relations in this highly globalized world with its shifting borders. This project thus inspires a rethinking of taxi riding and driving experiences as compelling stages of interaction and collisions, or in theater terms – a rich scene of drama.

Both A Grain of Sand and Sining Bayan developed their political artistic vision at a time of war. Their critique of the United States included a profound understanding of the connection between international and domestic policies. And thus, I conclude acknowledging various works created and performed by theater artists, as this community asked: What is the relevance of theater at a time of national crisis following the events of September 11, 2001 in the United States and its continuing aftermath? Dan Kwong's *It's Great 2b American*, Denise Uyehara's *Big Head*, Anida Yoeu Ali's *1700% Project*, and Shishir Kurup's *Sharif Don't Like It*, among a number of Asian American theater artists asserted Asian American perspectives in the changing everyday landscape that the events of September 11, 2001 brought about. Grappling with times of national crisis, these artists created works that expressed their struggle with their identity as Americans. What does it mean to be an American now? Their performance works sought to reach out to those who become target of racial and religious profiling, by remembering the aftermath of the Japanese attack of Pearl Harbor during World War II when those presumed to be Japanese American were incarcerated in camps. These performances put a spotlight on languages to justify the suspension of civil liberties, increased

militarization, sanctioned racial profiling, and the question of loyalty. These artists's works identify 9/11 as a racializing moment – in particular for South Asian Americans and Cambodian Americans. If the bombing of Pearl Harbor racialized Japanese Americans, as enemy aliens and later as wronged citizens, the events of 9/11 has been argued by many as similarly racializing moment for South Asians, Cambodian Americans, and Arab Americans. The spirit of *A Grain of Sand* and *Sining Bayan* as social protest performances by and about Asian Americans lives on vibrantly and robustly.

Notes

- 1 *Conversations: Asian American Arts and Activism*, directed by Bob Nakamura (Los Angeles: The Center for Ethno Communications of the UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 2010), DVD.
- 2 Joanne Miyamoto, Chris Iijima, and Charlie Chin, *A Grain of Sand: Music for the Struggle of Asians in America*, Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Paredon Records, 1973, audiocassette.
- 3 Harry J. Elam, *Taking It to the Streets: The Social Protest Theater of Luis Valdez and Amiri Baraka* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 3.
- 4 *Conversations*.
- 5 Maria Josephine Barrios, "The *Taumbayan* as Epic Hero, the Audience as Community," in *Radical Street Performance: An International Anthology*, ed. Jan Cohen Cruz (London: Routledge, 1998), 255–61.
- 6 Maria Josephine Barrios, "Tungo sa Estetika ng Dulaang Panlansangan," master's thesis (Manila, Philippines: De La Salle University, 1994).
- 7 *Ibid.*, 261.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 2–3.
- 9 Elam, *Taking It to the Streets*, 12.
- 10 Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Modernity and Its Malcontent: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Victor Turner, *The Drums of Affliction: A Study of Religious Processes among the Ndembo of Zambia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press and International African Institute, 1968).
- 11 Rose Muzio, *Puerto Rican Radicalism in the 1970s: El Comité-MINP*, PhD diss., CUNY, 2009; Sojin Kim, "Music for the Struggle by Asians in America," *Smithsonian Folkways Magazine: Featuring Asian American Music*. Online resource: http://www.folkways.si.edu/magazine/2011_spring/cover_story-a-grain-of-sand-4.aspx (accessed January 13, 2014).
- 12 *A Grain of Sand*.
- 13 In his survey essay of Asian American music, Oliver Wang discusses other popular music artists who are Asian Americans during this period. Oliver Wang, "Between the Notes: Finding Asian American Popular Music," *American Music* 19.4 (Winter 2001): 439–65.
- 14 *Conversations*.
- 15 Elam, *Taking It to the Streets*, 17.

- 16 *A Grain of Sand*.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 *Conversations*.
- 19 *A Grain of Sand*.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Elaine Kim's insightful analysis of Asian American literature: "So much writing by Asian Americans is focused on the theme of claiming an American, as opposed to Asian, identity that we may begin to wonder if this constitutes accommodation, a collective colonized spirit – the fervent wish to 'hide our ancestry,' which is impossible for us anyway, to relinquish our marginality, and to lose ourselves in an intense identification with the hegemonic culture. Or is it in fact a celebration of our marginality and a profound expression of protest against being defined by domination?" Elaine Kim, "Asian American Realities through Literature," *Cultural Critique* 6 (1987): 88.
- 22 Karen Shimakawa discusses the use of yellow face as mimicry, arguing that Asian American performances such as David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* "critically reterritorialize the position of the abject through mimicry." Karen Shimakawa, *National Abjection: The Asian American Body on Stage* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 21. Angela Pao, "The Eyes of the Storm: Gender, Genre and Cross-casting in *Miss Saigon*," *Performance and Text* (1992): 21–39 discusses the labor of props and prosthetics in the making of yellow-face performance. Josephine Lee's *The Japan of Pure Invention: Gilbert and Sullivan's The Mikado* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010) discusses performance, Asian racialization, and racial others as commodity fetishism.
- 23 C.Y. Lee, *Flower Drum Song* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1957), adopted by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II into musical theater (1958) on Broadway. It was made into a popular film in the 1961 produced by Universal International Pictures. Both Nobuko Miyamoto and Chris Iijima contrast the cultural work they are doing against *Flower Drum Song*. Iijima brings up *Flower Drum Song* to differentiate the kind of singing that they were doing in the documentary *Conversations*. For Miyamoto, *Flower Drum Song* comes up because of her early career as a Broadway performer. She was a dancer in the 1958 musical theater production on Broadway of the *Flower Drum Song*.
- 24 Wang, "Between the Notes."
- 25 "The Art and Practice of the Ordinary." *The Poetry Daily*. Online resource: http://poems.com/special_features/prose/essay_bernstein.php (accessed on December 30, 2013). See Charles Bernstein, *Attack of the Difficult Poems: Essay and Inventions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).
- 26 This group's name cites what has been known to be the first artist "happening," the "people's art," in Quiapo's Plaza Miranda, center of Manila. See *Makiisa: The Philippine Experience: Proceedings and Anthology of Essays, Poems, Songs, Skits, and Plays of the MAKIISA 1, People's Culture Festival* (Manila, Philippines: Philippine Educational Theater Association in cooperation with People's Resource Collection, Philippine Assistance for Rural and Urban Development, 1984), 3. This day-long event consisted of murals, poetry performances, play, and dance pieces that expressed a critique of the U.S.-Marcos imperial alliance. U.S. Sining Bayan follows the lead of this cultural gathering to centralize the arts as part of political actions within the U.S. KDP agenda.

- 27 Geron, Kim, Enrique de la Cruz, Leland Saito, and Jaideep Singh, "Asian Americans' Social Movement and Interest Groups," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 34.3 (2001): 618–24.
- 28 *Manong* means "older brother." In Filipino American history, the term *manongs* has been used to refer to the generation of male migrant workers who came to the United States in the mid-1920s.
- 29 The International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) in Hawai'i served as a coproducer of this musical. The production toured the bigger islands of the state of Hawai'i. Like *Sining Bayan*'s other plays, the artistic team conducted oral interviews of the older generation about their experiences as workers, as organizers. The creation of this musical also entailed extensive research in the ILWU archives. There were twelve actors performing forty-five roles. See "The Art of Organizing: *Ti mangyuna* 'Those Who Led the Way,'" directed by Chris Conybeare with Guy Fujimura and Ermena Vinluan. (West O'ahu: Center for Education, Labor, and Research, University of Hawai'i, 1981), DVD. Beyond simply valorizing the strike, the production staged the failure of this workers' effort, highlighting the limits of ethno-nationalism that get in the way of political unity.
- 30 Arellano Law Foundation. *The Law Phil Project*. http://www.lawphil.net/executive/proc/proc_1081_1972.html (accessed February 25, 2014).
- 31 Madge Bello and Vincent Reyes, "Filipino Americans and the Marcos Overthrow: The Transformation of Political Consciousness, 1986–1987," *Amerasia Journal* 13 (1986–7): 74. Writings on the US-based Anti-Martial Law Movement include Barbara Gaerlan, "The Movement in the United States to Oppose Martial Law in the Philippines, 1972–1991: An Overview," *Pilipinas* 33 (Fall 1999): 75–98 and Helen Toribio, "Dare to Struggle: The KDP and Filipino American Politics" and "We Are Revolution: A Reflective History of the Union of Democratic Filipinos," *Amerasia* 24.2 (1998): 155–77.
- 32 "Terror and Culture under Marcos's New Society." Web site closed May 13, 2013. Online resource: http://andrescebu.multiply.com/journal/item/19/Terror_And_Culture_Under_Marcos_New_Society (accessed February 12, 2013).
- 33 Roberta Uno and Lucy Burns, "Interview with Ermena Vinluan." Uno Archive Collection of Plays by Asian American Women, W.E.B. DuBois Library, UMass Amherst, MA, 1996.
- 34 Robert Kikuchi. E-mail interview with author (2002).
- 35 Alisa Solomon, "Up Front: Change the World: It Needs It," *Theater* 35.3 (2005): 4.
- 36 Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1985); T.V. Reed, *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of Seattle* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).
- 37 Miyamoto directed the troupe's *Children of War*. See "Something Larger Than Ourselves: Interview with Nobuko Miyamoto," in Lucy Burns, *The Color of Theater: Race, Culture, and Contemporary Performance* (London: Continuum Press, 2002), 195–205.
- 38 These productions include *MOTTAINAI* and *BYO Chopstix*. *Great Leap*. Online resource: <http://www.greatleap.org/index.php?view=media&id=50522>.

Inventing Identity: The Manifestos of Pioneering Asian American Literature Anthologies

DONALD GOELLNIGHT

This chapter, in many ways symptomatic of the anthology as a genre, is selective in the anthologies it examines. It focuses on important early Asian American literary anthologies (covering the period 1972 to the early 1990s), those that had a significant impact on the field in general and in shaping Asian American cultural identities in particular. It makes no attempt to be a comprehensive survey of early Asian American anthologies, nor does it cover general Asian American anthologies that include some literary material but are dominated by sociological, political, ethnographic, or journalistic writing, important as those collections are.

From the outset, Asian American anthologies were seen by their editors as functioning to form, shape, and fashion Asian American identity, or to produce the Asian American subject, not only describing, representing, and reflecting it, but establishing its contours and content, and attempting to police its borders. Literature was considered to have a profound impact on identity formation, both communal and individual. This view of the role of anthologies is not new: Friedrich Kittler claims that in late-eighteenth-century Germany, anthologies replaced the Bible as vehicles for the unification of the culture,¹ while the proliferation of race and ethnicity-based literary anthologies in the latter half of the twentieth century, especially in the United States, points to the ambitions of anthologists and their publishers in the formation of racial, ethnic, and cultural identity.

These early anthologies have political, pedagogical, and aesthetic dimensions, aiming to select, shape, and teach a cultural tradition. They also serve an archaeological or recovery function of unearthing “lost,” out-of-print, and undervalued texts from the specific cultural tradition. This is a tradition that they simultaneously or reciprocally help to form into a literary canon in the very act of “recovery,” which can never be complete or comprehensive but is

always already ideologically inflected. Indeed, the ideological position of the anthologist may be to explode the very notion of canons by bringing forward noncanonical works from a wide range of nontraditional sources. At the same time, anthologies function to solidify texts and choices by what they include and exclude in necessarily limited space.²

This view of the role that anthologies that collect works by racialized, ethnicized, and/or minoritized groups play in forming literary and broader cultural identities has been vigorously articulated in relation to Asian Canadian anthologies. Lien Chao and later Janey Lew have argued, in relation to Chinese Canadian identity, that the anthology is a powerful tool for representing “community-driven initiatives to articulate ethno-national identity and activate social change.”³ Chao proclaims that “a literary form – the anthology – has been employed as a political and aesthetic manifesto to announce the collective cause and to reveal the sensitivity of Chinese Canadians.... The discursive configuration in the anthologies represents the collective endeavour of Chinese Canadian writers to transform the community’s hundred-year silence into a resistant voice.”⁴ Building on Chao’s work, Lew somewhat-more-cautiously sets out “to explore how the anthologies act as sites for negotiating community boundaries, positing coalitions, deconstructing social and literary institutions, and asserting legitimacy.”⁵ Theirs is a largely optimistic view of the ability of anthologies of racial or ethnic literature to generate and solidify communal connections, whether that be a singular ethnic community or coalitional communities based on intersectionality, through a process of coming to “voice.” This argument is based to a considerable degree on numbers: a gathering of texts/voices will, by sheer dint of volume, prove the establishment of the ethnic/racial community, while the preservation of these ostensibly foundational texts, many of which had gone out of print, is more likely to be guaranteed, and the texts circulated, in a single, affordable volume.

Early Anthologies

Edited by Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong and published in 1974, *Aiiieeeee!* is the most well-known early anthology of Asian American writing. It is, however, not the first. The earliest such anthology is *Asian American Authors*, edited by Kai-yu Hsu and Helen Palubinskas and published in 1972 as part of a Houghton Mifflin series on “Multi-Ethnic Authors.” Hsu was a professor and chair of the Comparative

Literature Department at San Francisco State University, where Palubinskas completed a master's degree in English. With San Francisco State being the university where student strikes in 1968–9 were instrumental in the founding of Asian American studies, their project emerges from a resonant foundational site. Their anthology includes work by all four of the *Aiiieeeee!* editors, so that to some extent *Asian American Authors* anticipates *Aiiieeeee!*, while Hsu and Palubinskas's views on racial identity, which form a prominent part of their introduction, set the stage for ongoing discussions of this topic in future anthologies.

Hsu and Palubinskas established the practice of using the introduction to the anthology as a forum in which to interrogate, define, reflect, and shape the identity of Asian Americans. They begin with a rather narrow definition: "In this anthology every effort was made to represent the works of writers of Asian origin who have had extensive living experience in America. Those born and reared in America were considered first; then those who came to this country when very young and remained here" (1). Filipinos who immigrated to the United States as adults are also included on the grounds that they learned English in the American educational system that had been established in the Philippines under the U.S. colonial regime and thus they wrote in English before immigrating. Most significantly, Hsu and Palubinskas limit inclusion to writers of Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino descent (1). They thus helped to establish Asian American identity as English speaking and primarily East Asian, centered on the national ethnic groups with the longest history in North America.

Hsu and Palubinskas focus on "the identity problem" or the crisis of the "self" (2) as the issue that dominates the "bicultural person" who experiences various forms of discrimination – from racist name calling through representation in texts by white writers to the internment of Japanese Americans – at the hands of white America. They anticipate Frank Chin and Jeffery Paul Chan's position that racial stereotypes, whether positive or negative, are damaging and need to be combatted.⁶ They specifically identify Chin, Chan, and Inada as "want[ing] no more Oriental-houseboy image, no more quaint and exotic curio image ... to be superimposed on them. Asian-American men want their masculinity recognized and responded to, fully and equally" (5), thus drawing attention to the historical emasculation or feminization of Asian American men as a major stereotype to be combatted in establishing an Asian American identity.

Without appearing to take sides, Hsu and Palubinskas nevertheless position the future *Aiiieeeee!* collective – and implicitly themselves – in opposition to

assimilationist writers like Virginia Lee, Toshio Mori, and C.Y. Lee, and at the forefront of a new generation of Asian American writers who are concerned with “the perpetual search” (2) for authentic identity. Interestingly, they claim that “Shawn Wong’s [the fourth *Aiiieeeee!* editor’s] poems . . . speak in quite universal terms of man’s [*sic*] joy and sorrow . . . [that] really reveals very little that is Asian-American” (6). They thus appear to align Shawn Wong more with Virginia Lee, who “is not so much concerned about being Chinese or American or Chinese-American or American-Chinese as she is about being human” (1), although they go to considerable lengths to recuperate Wong for the Asian American side by claiming that his is still a search “to know more of himself” (6), a search for identity, while Lee and company proclaim that their universal humanity is beyond such a search.

Hsu and Palubinskas end up dismissing writers who cling to a Chinese past, presenting it as exotica to white American audiences, as well as writers who represent themselves as good, assimilated subjects, “silent sufferers, meek, uncomplaining, always hiding, always running away from trouble” (8) – a description that relates to that of the “model minority” emerging in the mainstream press at around the same time. Instead, they champion Frank Chin and his crew as writers who shape a resistant identity that is neither Asian nor white American but something different that they are in the process of forming: a subject Chin labels “a Chinaman” (6). It is important to note, however, that Hsu and Palubinskas still include writers they consider assimilationist in their selection – Pardee Lowe, Jade Snow Wong, Virginia Lee, Toshio Mori, Daniel Inouye – thereby leaving readers to come to their own conclusions about Asian American identity, even though they attempt to shape the reading process in advance.

There are other prescient aspects of Hsu and Palubinskas’s introduction that warrant attention. They align Frank Chin and his coeditors with the black civil rights movement in the use of confrontational tactics, and they discuss this younger generation of writers as having a “tragicomic vision,” which aligns them with the philosophical position of Ralph Ellison. They also discuss the difficulties of racialized writers using Standard English, an aesthetic form that is thoroughly white, language being the conveyor of ideology. They observe that African American writers have found a meaningful alternative voice in their adoption of black English, but lament that there is yet no Asian American equivalent. In this claim, they failed to recognize the resistant potential of a text like Louis Chu’s *Eat a Bowl of Tea* with its translations from Cantonese to English that produced a hybrid form. Finally, their introduction establishes the history of Chinese exclusion and Japanese internment as foundational

historical events for Asian American writers and thus for Asian American identity. This move plays a crucial role in establishing the early contours of Asian American studies as East Asian (and Filipino).

While Hsu and Palubinskas produced the first Asian American anthology, it was Frank Chin, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong who two years later published the most influential anthology in the field, *Aiiieeeee!*, with Howard University Press, and who took on the job of defining and forging a specific Asian American identity more forcefully and self-consciously than had been attempted before. Living up to Hsu and Palubinskas's characterization of them, their tone is aggressive, even militant, in its uncompromising attack not only on dominant white American culture that has wreaked havoc on Asian American communities for generations through various forms of discrimination, but also on Asian American writers – and communities more broadly – that reveal any hint of assimilationist, model minority behavior.

Envisioning themselves as establishing the canon of Asian American literature, Chin and company went out of their way to unearth texts by older writers that are not overtly assimilationist, do not play to a desire in white publishers and readers for the exotic, and do not attempt to convey a universal message. In some ways their aims in selecting texts for *Aiiieeeee!* anticipate and attempt to avoid the criticism of how anthologies may be used by white publishers, criticism that Roy Miki raises later. Miki, who is less sanguine than other critics about the value of anthologies for forming racial or ethnic identities, warns that the anthology is, “in many ways, a marketable container to present a ‘variety’ of writers from one ethnic or cultural enclave, all at once as it were,” thus involving “complex risks of compromise and appropriation by publishers and otherwise well-intentioned editors and critics.”⁷ Larissa Lai presses Miki's argument further, warning against the dangers of “strategic essentialism, reification, institutionalization, and other kinds of solidification [that] tend towards commodification,” including the ethnic anthology, in the neoliberal moment.⁸ Miki and Lai are right to raise questions about who is producing and consuming minority texts and for what purposes, and to warn against the anthology's potentially dangerous participation in the commodification, reception, codification, and racialization of writers of color (120). They raise legitimate concerns about the anthology's tendency to decontextualize and homogenize through grouping, although I would observe that the anthology can perform different work in different social and political contexts. Because readers of anthologies often graze and choose among selections, rarely reading the entire text, it is quite possible, even likely, that readers

from inside the racialized community will read different texts – and read them differently – than mainstream / white readers will. Further, we need to remember that race is only one vector of difference, that the racialized community and the mainstream are not monoliths. This means that the range of different types of texts offered to readers in an anthology becomes important, especially for anthologies that purport to champion difference. This is not the case with *Aiiieeeee!*, however, whose editors seek systematically to establish a “real” or authentic Asian American identity through literature that is “serious” art rather than popular culture.

By 1974, Chin and his coeditors had unearthed several older Asian American texts that they considered serious literature, some, like Carlos Bulosan’s *America Is in the Heart* and Diana Chang’s *Frontiers of Love*, published by major houses Harcourt Brace Jovanovich and Random House. But they had also managed to find John Okada’s *No-No Boy* (1957) and Louis Chu’s *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1961), which were published by smaller, lesser-known presses Charles E. Tuttle and Lyle Stuart. Further, they found other early texts published by local newspapers, including stories by Toshio Mori and Hisaye Yamamoto. Despite having more texts to choose from, however, the *Aiiieeeee!* editors focus on including a narrow range of texts that would align with the politicized identity they wished to fashion for Asian American readers. Eschewing poetry and any form of life writing – Chin considers autobiography to be a white, Christian genre – they select almost exclusively prose in a realist form, with variations ranging from the psychological (John Okada) through the melodramatic (Diana Chang) to the comic (Louis Chu), along with a scattering of drama.

In dictating a specific identity for Asian Americans, the *Aiiieeeee!* editorial collective also adopted one for themselves: the American-born Chinatown cowboys who were blazing the Asian American cultural trail and attempting to set the standard of what would constitute Asian American literature. Following the example of the 1960s black arts movement, and in particular of Ishmael Reed, they valorized a specific type of Asian American writing that is overtly concerned with combating racism and with preserving myths of a heroic, masculinist, working-class Asian American past that maintains connections to a militaristic Asian literary and cultural tradition. They define the term *Asian-American* as encompassing “Filipino-, Chinese-, and Japanese-Americans, American born and raised, who got their China and Japan from the radio, off the silver screen, from television, out of comic books, from the pushers of white American culture that pictured the yellow man as something that when wounded, sad, or angry, or swearing, or

wondering whined, shouted, or screamed ‘aiiiiii!’ ” (vii). Excluding writers born in Asia, they further proclaim that “Chinese- and Japanese-Americans have been separated by geography, culture, and history from China and Japan for seven and four generations respectively,” so that “Asian-American sensibilities and cultures . . . might be related to but are distinct from Asia and white America” (vii–viii). In asserting an American presence for Asian Americans and their literature, they go so far as to adopt the nativist claim that “Chinese or Japanese birth” is usually enough to disqualify an author from having an “Asian-American sensibility,” although they concede that “between the writer’s actual birth [place] and birth of the [Asian American] sensibility, we have used birth of the sensibility as the measure of being an Asian-American” (ix). They admit to their anthology “exceptions” like Louis Chu, whose “sensibility” they pronounce to be Asian American even though he was born in China and immigrated to America when he was nine. They were also willing to overlook Chu’s middle-class status because he wrote about lower-class Chinese Americans living in Chinatown through one of the harshest periods in Chinese immigration history. In contrast, they single out for attack Asian-born writers who have “succeeded in becoming ‘Chinese-American’ in the stereotypical sense of the good, loyal, obedient, passive, law-abiding, cultured sense of the word” (x).

Eschewing the usual criticism of the *Aiiiii!* group’s cultural nationalism as being complicit with the essentialist ideology of dominant U.S. nationalism, Jinqi Ling offers a more nuanced explanation of the group’s necessary nationalism in the early 1970s and of “the contradictory impulses of the editors’ positions” between American nativism and traditional Chinese mythic militarism.⁹ As Ling observes, “[t]he [Aiiiii!] editors’ extreme assertion of their American identity – and their simultaneous questioning of such identity’s ideological coherence – thus functioned as a staunch polemic against liberal notions of assimilation and integration that dominated the public discourse on race relations in American society in the early 1970s” (25–6). Ironically, in their efforts to combat the hegemony of Eurocentric liberal humanism, Chin and other cultural nationalists were generating their own hegemonic discourse on what it means to be an Asian American subject. Elaine Kim summarizes this discursive subject succinctly: “According to this definition, there were not many ways to be Asian American. The ideal was male, heterosexual, Chinese or Japanese American, and English-speaking.”¹⁰

The year 1974 also saw the publication of a second anthology, *Asian-American Heritage: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry* edited by David Hsin-Fu Wand with a substantial introduction, as well as commentaries

on each section by Wand. Unlike Hsu and Palubinskas, who divided their anthology along ethnic/national lines, Wand classifies his texts by genre, thus presenting a pan-Asian American perspective. From the outset of his introduction, he focuses on the issue of identity, what he labels the “existential question: What is an Asian-American?” (2). While his Asian America is broader than that of Hsu and Palubinskas in that he too includes Korean Americans along with Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino Americans, it nevertheless remains predominantly an identity rooted in East Asia and Confucianism. Wand claims that Filipinos are “[r]acially classified as Malaysians instead of Mongolians and culturally influenced by Spain” (5), which makes them “brown” rather than “yellow” and closer to Mexicans in their cultural identity. Somewhat contradictorily, Wand goes out of his way to prove that Filipinos are an anomaly in Asian America, but also to include them by virtue of their colonial connections to the United States. Strangely unrecognized in relation to Japan, Korea, Taiwan, or Vietnam in these early anthologies, despite the Asian American movement’s strong opposition to the War in Vietnam, American imperialism nevertheless becomes important to an understanding of Asian American identity through colonialism in the Philippines. The connections Wand emphasizes between Filipino and Hispanic communities elsewhere anticipate work done later on histories of cross-ethnic coalitions in the Americas and of transpacific connections between Manila and Mexico.

Taking an interrogative, descriptive, and thus ostensibly balanced, approach by which he tends to pose questions and describe situations rather than make categorical pronouncements, Wand mounts an argument that contains significant differences from the positions expressed by the *Aiiieeeee!* collective. For example, he suggests that Asian American status should not be limited to second- and subsequent-generation writers of Asian descent, including in his anthology first-generation Asian immigrants who become naturalized Americans; however, after seeming to criticize postwar Asian Americans for not being able to speak their ancestral languages, he still limits Asian American status to those who write in English, “the lingua franca of Asian-Americans” (6). He even appears to go so far as to support Chin and company’s claim that there are Chinese American and Japanese American Englishes, similar to black English, languages rather than mere dialects (7), a move that counters Hsu and Palubinskas’s lament that Asian America has not produced an equivalent of black English. For Wand, as well as for the *Aiiieeeee!* editors, a hybrid/bent/slant English is necessary to ensure that Asian Americans have not become compliant assimilated subjects. Their insistence ties into debates current at the

time about the use of English in postcolonial cultures, an argument taken up most famously a decade later by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Audre Lorde, and also highly relevant to the cultural production of Pacific islands like Hawai'i, where pidgin or Creole is widely spoken.

In the end, Wand adopts a more expansive definition of Asian American writerly identity, incorporating both "the militant young, always in search of their ethnic identity, as typified by Lawson Fusao Inada and Frank Chin" – whom he considers to have "more in common with . . . the militant blacks" (7) – as well as "the politically moderate such as Richard E. Kim (born in Korea in 1932) and Diana Chang (born in the States but brought up in China)" (7) who "are more concerned with the human condition than with race or ethnicity" (8). At the same time, though, Wand insists that "no two Asian-American writers have banded together to found a school" (8) – a claim that may have been naïve or outdated, given the appearance of *Aiiieeeee!* – while he clings to a liberal notion that the works of Bulosan, Diana Chang, and Okada "have an appeal more universal than regional. They strike a chord in the deepest recess of the mind, the collective unconscious, since they are concerned with the human condition of the outsider, the marginal man, the pariah" (9).

Wand's most radical and prescient move, however, was to venture into the as-yet-uncharted territory of how Pacific Islanders, whom he calls "Polynesians," fit into Asian America. He starts with the question "Are Polynesians Asian?" (9), goes on to observe that they are racially, culturally, and linguistically different from East Asians and that "[t]he majority of Polynesians are not American citizens" (11), but then points out that geographically Polynesia is connected to the Philippines, even if the two are no longer culturally similar. Concluding that "geographic location" is "the deciding factor," he "include[s] Polynesian oral literature in this anthology" (11), even as he acknowledges the problem of conveying oral poetic performance on the printed page. Observing that "Hawaiians and Samoans are native Americans of the fiftieth state, which is geographically a part of Southeast Asia," he sets out "to give the reader some sample transliteration of Hawaiian and Samoan oral poetry" (13). Despite his somewhat anthropological approach (there is a trace of primitivism in his characterization of oral "myths and legends") in this otherwise bold move, Wand anticipates future debates about the expansive Asian American Pacific Islander identity at a time when Chin and company were trying to narrow and limit the definition of Asian American identity. Out of all proportion to the space allotted to Polynesian oral poetry in the main text, Wand devotes a major portion of his introduction to examining "how the

linguistic, educational, and economic conditions of the Polynesian-Americans keep them from having a prominent voice in literature” (15). In many ways, Wand’s approach has proved to be the more visionary one.

Despite the considerable overlap in their discussions of Asian American identity, the editors of these three initial anthologies agreed on few writers to be included in their selections. There was as yet no clear consensus on what constituted an Asian American canon, or about who were the important writers for shaping Asian American identity. Of the writers featured in the three anthologies (twenty-two in *Asian American Authors*, fourteen in *Aiiieeeee!*, which was the most ideologically focused, and twenty-three plus the oral poetry in *Asian-American Heritage*), only three appeared in all three texts: Toshio Mori, Hisaye Yamamoto, and Diana Chang. Another nine made it into two of the three anthologies: Pardee Lowe, Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Shawn Wong, Jose Garcia Villa, Samuel Tagatac, Oscar Penaranda, Carlos Bulosan, and John Okada. Despite the complete or relative absence of some authors who would soon emerge as central to the canon of older Asian American writers – Louis Chu and Wakako Yamauchi appear only in *Aiiieeeee!*, for example, while Monica Sone and Bienvenido Santos don’t make the cut at all – the list of twelve who appear in at least two of the anthologies is fairly prescient, or is evidence of the anthology’s power to shape literary canons. That *Aiiieeeee!* included eleven of the twelve indicates either the ability of the editors to choose the “best” or most “representative” writers or their ability to fashion the identity of the Asian American canon, or a combination of the two. The list of twelve is also predictive or hegemonic in terms of genre, heavily weighted in favor of prose fiction (short stories and novel excerpts) and memoir, with a nod to poetry and drama, a proportion that has continued to dominate Asian American literary studies, despite Wand’s early attempt to give poetry a prominent place, and periodic attempts to redistribute critical attention across the genres later. The focus in these early anthologies on identity politics meant that there was much greater concern with literature as a tool for ideological contestation than with aesthetic value in the sense of evaluating the “best” literature in and of itself, art for art’s sake.¹¹ This approach distinguishes anthologies based on race or ethnicity from many mainstream anthologies that attempted to shape aesthetic tastes. Also notable is the fact that writers like Toshio Mori and Diana Chang, who are often considered “assimilationist” or “universal,” nevertheless get included in all three anthologies, while others, particularly of the “Flip” generation like Tagatac and Penaranda, have tended to fade from sight in broader Asian American literary studies.

Feminist Anthologies

After these three initial anthologies that appeared in the early 1970s, the next important development in Asian American literary anthologizing was work by feminist editors – often whole collectives – that were published at the end of the 1980s with the express goal of recovering, discovering, and promoting writing by a broad range of Asian American women. The most significant and widely available of these anthologies are *The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian American Women's Anthology*, edited by Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Mayumi Tsutakawa, and Margarita Donnelly (Managing Editor), and *Making Waves: An Anthology of Writings by and about Asian American Women*, edited by Asian Women United of California, a feminist collective. Both appeared in 1989 with the editors of *The Forbidden Stitch* claiming, “it is the first anthology of Asian American women’s writing to appear in the United States” (12) and the *Making Waves* collective claiming that it is “the first major compilation of primarily unpublished works by and about Asian American women since the early 1970s” (ix).¹²

Despite the intersectional approach through race and gender of these anthologies, which might seem to narrow the conception of identity they advocate, they in fact take a more expansive approach to Asian American identity than their earlier, male-dominated counterparts. The editors seem less interested in constructing and policing identity and more interested in reflecting and attempting to represent the multiplicitous, diverse identities of Asian American women. Shirley Lim’s introductory comments are indicative:

If the women’s movement has discovered “difference” to be a liberating rather than oppressive principle, ... the experience of being an “Asian American woman” is an exemplar of living in difference. Despite the still-flourishing stereotype of the “Asian American woman” as more submissive, more domestic, and ... more sexually available than her other American sisters, Asian American women exhibit a bewildering display of differences. We do not share a common history, a common original culture or language, not even a common physique or color. ... If we form a thread, the thread is a multi-colored, many-layered, complexly knotted stitch. (*Forbidden Stitch*, 10)

If there is any limiting of identity in these anthologies it arises out of a rejection of stereotypes of Asian American women.¹³ Mayumi Tsutakawa goes further to assert that there are no common themes holding *Forbidden Stitch* together – it is organized generically and includes artwork and reviews, along with poetry and prose – and that in the selection process, she “sought to go

beyond the detention camps, beyond the ‘my mother was a pioneer and how she suffered’ writing. I was looking for contemporary ideas and new works by individual artists, not sameness of observation or circumstance” (*Forbidden Stitch*, 13). Tsutakawa thus seeks to expand our understanding of the foundational history of Asian America. She admits, however, to rejecting work that “did not carry a recognizable Asian voice” (14), a criterion that seems a throwback to the *Aiiieeeee!* editors’ litmus test of an “Asian-American sensibility” to decide on inclusion. Neither can articulate clearly, however, what the characteristics might be that constitute “a recognizable Asian voice” or an “Asian-American sensibility.” Does this intangible quality reside in the cultural producer, the writer or artist, in the thematic content of the work, or in the perception of the reader/viewer, the interpretive community? This is an issue that continues to haunt Asian American literary and cultural studies into the present.¹⁴

Both *Making Waves* and *Forbidden Stitch* adopt something of a consciousness-raising tone that is part of second-wave feminism, stressing the importance of Asian American women coming to voice and of making women’s life stories and histories visible, known and available. Indeed, Sucheta Mazumdar’s very informative “Woman-Centered Perspective on Asian American History,” which covers various ethnic and national groups, forms the major part of the introductory material in *Making Waves*. Mazumdar explores the differing ways in which issues of race, ethnicity, gender, and class shape Asian American identity, again emphasizing the heterogeneity of experience, although *Making Waves* is organized around significant themes such as “Immigration,” “War,” “Work,” and “Identity,” which draw attention to some common concerns and experiences that cut across differences of ethnicity, nation, class, religion, language, and genre.

These feminist anthologies collectively offer a much wider range of work and creators than the three early anthologies, not just in terms of numbers of writers and artists included (each lists more than fifty contributors), but also in the expanded range of authorial national/ethnic origin. This shift reflects the changed demographics of the wider Asian American community in the quarter century since the 1965 Immigration Act and the fifteen years since the end of the War in Vietnam in 1975 brought a radical increase in Southeast Asian Americans through refugee and other immigration programs. Indeed, both *Forbidden Stitch* and *Making Waves* stress the importance of the inclusion of “clear new voices” (*Forbidden Stitch*, 14) and “newer arrivals” (*Making Waves*, ix) from “South and Southeast Asian countries” (*Forbidden Stitch*, 14), although the editors of *Making Waves* lament that it was impossible to reach their goal

of “equal representation of all ethnic groups” (ix). Together, they indicate the strong influence of women writers and of feminism in Asian American cultural production and in various academic professions since the publication of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* in 1976. The fact that the anthologies make no appeal to being born in America, as we find in their earlier counterparts, is also indicative of their inclusive approach, not only in terms of ethnic/racial identity, but in terms of language and profession. This eschewing of nativity anticipates the turn to more flexible understandings of Asian American identity as diasporic and transnational, an approach that was then gaining momentum and that is often taken as being “announced” by the publication of Lisa Lowe’s “Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences” in the first issue of *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* (1991).

Each expansion of the concept of Asian American identity also speaks to the historical limitations of the concept, however, pointing up the currently excluded or the yet to be included. In the case of these anthologies, the “Asian” designation does not include West Asian or Arab Asian women, while the “American” is limited to the United States, a hemispheric sense of Asian American identity (“the Americas”) having not yet gained traction. Perhaps most significant, there is virtually no treatment of queer sexuality as an important register of identity in the introductions, and only one contributor to each anthology, Merle Woo in *Forbidden Stitch* and Chea Villanueva in *Making Waves*, identifies herself as a lesbian feminist, while a second contributor to *Making Waves*, Pamela H. (a lawyer who doesn’t give her surname), is described as having been “affiliated” with lesbian and gay groups. This absence is surprising, given the major role played by lesbian writers like Kitty Tsui, Barbara Noda, and Willyce Kim in the Asian American feminist movement. In fact, Tsui is included in *Making Waves* without being identified as lesbian. Taken together with the frequent references to contributors’ husbands and children in the contributor notes of *Making Waves*, one is almost forced to speculate that there is a decided attempt to present a heterosexual Asian American feminism in these anthologies. Ironically, *Between the Lines: An Anthology by Pacific/Asian Lesbians of Santa Cruz*, edited by C. Chung, A. Kim, and A.K. Lemeschewsky, had appeared earlier in 1987, but it does not gain the critical attention of the two later feminist anthologies. It would be another four years after their publication before Karin Aguilar-San Juan’s seminal article “Landmarks in Literature by Asian American Lesbians” appeared in *Signs* (Summer 1993).

Competing Visions

I close with a brief consideration of *The Big Aiiieeeee!*, edited by the same collective of Jeffery Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong, and published in 1991, seventeen years after *Aiiieeeee!*, and *Charlie Chan Is Dead: An Anthology of Asian American Fiction*, edited by Jessica Hagedorn and published in 1993. One is immediately struck by the shift in the *Aiiieeeee!* subtitles from the first volume, *An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*, to the second, *An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature*. Although the anthology is “bigger” – and proclaimed to be such – the editors’ sense of what constitutes Asian American identity, or at least the important ethnic/national groups in that identity, has narrowed with the jettisoning of Filipino American writing, which is not explained in any way. Although they carefully avoid using the term *Asian American* in the subtitle, it nevertheless creeps back into the body of the introduction and especially into Frank Chin’s overwrought essay “Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake,” where the slippage between Chinese/Japanese American and Asian American, which occurs fairly often, has the effect of making these groups “representative” of Asian Americans.

The introduction by the editorial collective and Chin’s opening essay are notorious attacks on any writer they consider assimilationist or a member of the model minority and on any writer of autobiography or memoir, which they consider to be a white, Christian genre that panders to a mainstream audience. Such attacks, which amount to a rejection of the Chinese American writers who have arguably become canonical in Asian American literature – “Jade Snow Wong, Maxine Hong Kingston, David Henry Hwang, Amy Tan, and Lin Yutang” (*Big Aiiieeeee!*, xv) – are loaded with antifeminist and homophobic rhetoric, even as the editors claim to be recuperating a Chinese heroic tradition that will combat mainstream American stereotypes of Asians and Asian Americans. King-Kok Cheung has produced a brilliant analysis of the ways in which *The Big Aiiieeeee!* reinstalls a narrow, militaristic, patriarchal identity for Chinese American men: “In taking whites to task for demeaning Asians, these writers seem nevertheless to be buttressing patriarchy by invoking gender stereotypes, by disparaging domestic efficiency as ‘feminine,’ and by slotting desirable traits such as originality, daring, physical courage, and creativity under the rubric of masculinity.”¹⁵ I don’t have the space here to rehearse the intricacies of Cheung’s argument; suffice it to say that the combination of *The Big Aiiieeeee!* and her critique demonstrates the ways in which an

ostensibly radical combatting of racist stereotypes of Asian American identity through a literary anthology can turn into its own dictatorial narrowing of what constitutes meaningful Asian American identity.

The Big Aiiieeeee! was perhaps the last gasp of a certain type of cultural nationalism that had emerged in the late 1960s and was being replaced by a transnational expansiveness exemplified by texts like *Charlie Chan Is Dead* (1993). In the preface, Elaine Kim champions those Asian American writers “seeking a third space as ‘both/and’ instead of ‘either/or,’” those who refuse the “mutually exclusive binaries between ‘East’ and ‘West,’ between Asia and America, and between suspect alien and patriot” (viii). In her introduction, Jessica Hagedorn offers the usual critique of the prevalent and persistent Orientalizing stereotypes of Asian Americans that have circulated in popular culture, vigorously aligning herself with the tradition of the cultural nationalists and various militant multiracial coalitions, and paying tribute to the *Aiiieeeee!* editors for their two anthologies. She goes on, however, to point out that this “first anthology of Asian American fiction by a commercial publisher [Penguin Books] . . . proudly presents forty-eight writers” – that is, it is significantly “bigger” than *The Big Aiiieeeee!* – and that “The writers selected for this anthology are exhilarating in their differences; there is an array of cultural backgrounds, age range, and literary styles gathered here” (xxviii). There is also a Canadian, Joy Kogawa, brought under the expanding umbrella of “Asian America,” a move toward a continental conception of “America” while nevertheless eliding any consideration of U.S. cultural imperialism. In the end, Hagedorn questions the very validity of the term as a meaningful signifier for the identities of this diverse group of writers: “Asian American literature? Too confining a term, maybe. World literature? Absolutely” (xxx). Notwithstanding the problematic nature of this grandiose claim that Asian American writers could represent “world literature” – itself a highly contested term – Hagedorn’s interrogation of the signifier “Asian American” is prescient. Her conclusion that “the language(s) we speak are not necessarily the language(s) in which we dream” (xxx) also gestures to the end of the domination of English as the “lingua franca.”

Hagedorn has broken open the identity categories, asserted her distance from Frank Chin, trumpeted the multiplicity of Asian Americanness, and seems to anticipate Kandice Chuh’s claim about the “need to manufacture ‘Asian American’ situationally.”¹⁶ In the wake of Chuh’s highly influential interrogation of “Asian American” as an identity category and her argument that it should be approached instead as a site of deconstructive critique, “a subjectless discourse” (9), it is more difficult to envision a future value for Asian

American literary anthologies founded on identity politics. Even when not contested, the term *Asian American* is now expected to cover such a vast array of literary production from different ethnic, national, religious, cultural, and linguistic communities originating in East, Southeast, South, and West/ Arab Asia and living in diaspora throughout the Americas – literature also written in different Asian and European languages – that it is possible to predict the exhaustion of the additive model on which anthologies have been based. Still, anthologies can efficiently provide thick genealogies, and alternative genealogies, that trace the relationships between literary texts in the Asian American “tradition,” however defined, the very texts from which these theoretical arguments have often emerged. Before we jettison identity, we would also do well to heed Colleen Lye’s speculation “that we may find out that institutional justification for Asian American studies relies in the last instance on the *raison* of identity, and that in doing away with our last essentialism, that is, our strategic essentialism, we will also do away with Asian American studies.”¹⁷

Notes

- 1 Friedrich A. Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer with Chris Cullens (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 144, 149.
- 2 As Jeffrey Di Leo states, “Anthologies are considered to be reflective of the laws of their domain. Both students and teachers can be humbled and intimidated by their inventories of readings.” Jeffrey Di Leo, “Analyzing Anthologies,” in *On Anthologies: Politics and Pedagogy*, ed. Jeffrey Di Leo (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 1.
- 3 Janey Lew, “What Do We Have in Canon? Chinese Canadian Anthologies and the Posit(ion)ing of an Ethno-National Literary Canon and Its Contexts,” master’s thesis, University of British Columbia, 2006, 14.
- 4 Lien Chao, “Anthologizing the Collective: The Epic Struggles to Establish Chinese Canadian Literature in English,” *Beyond Silence: Chinese Canadian Literature in English* (Toronto: TSAR Publications, 1997), 33–4.
- 5 Lew, “What Do We Have in Canon?,” 2.
- 6 Frank Chin and Jeffery Paul Chan, “Racist Love,” in *Seeing through Shuck*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), 65–79.
- 7 Roy Miki, *Broken Entries: Race Subjectivity Writing* (Toronto: Mercury Press, 1998), 119.
- 8 Larissa Lai, *Slanting I, Imagining We: Asian Canadian Literary Production in the 1980s and 1990s* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2014), 87.
- 9 Jinqi Ling, *Narrating Nationalisms: Ideology and Form in Asian American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 23–9.
- 10 Elaine Kim, “Preface,” *Charlie Chan Is Dead: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction*, ed. Jessica Hagedorn (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), ix.
- 11 Taking a somewhat different position than most critics, Mark Chiang argues that *Aiiieeeee!* “effectively proposes that ‘serious’ literature is the answer to racism and the political disempowerment of the Asian American community ... culture competes

- with politics for legitimacy.” Chiang examines in detail the contradictions between the editors’ attempts to shape an Asian American community that they considered to be largely “inauthentic.” Mark Chiang, *The Cultural Capital of Asian American Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 145.
- 12 In fact, Asian American feminist anthologies can be traced back to *Asian Women* (Berkeley: University of California, Berkeley, 1971), a journal published at Berkeley. It did not circulate widely.
 - 13 The introduction to Asian Women United of California, eds., *Making Waves: An Anthology of Writings By and About Asian American Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989) mounts the same argument: “Contrary to the erroneous stereotype that Asian American women are passive and submissive, this anthology shows that we are not afraid to rock the boat. Making waves. This is what Asian American women have done and will continue to do” (xi).
 - 14 See, e.g., Mark Jerng, “Nowhere in Particular: Perceiving Race, Chang-rae Lee’s *Aloft*, and the Question of Asian American Fiction,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 56.1 (Spring 2010): 183–204; Jennifer Ann Ho, “The Place of Transgressive Texts in Asian American Epistemology,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 56.1 (Spring 2010): 205–25.
 - 15 King-Kok Cheung, “The Woman Warrior versus The Chinaman Pacific: Must a Chinese American Critic Choose between Feminism and Heroism?,” in *Conflicts in Feminism*, ed. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (New York: Routledge, 1990), 237.
 - 16 Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 10.
 - 17 Colleen Lye, “Racial Form,” *Representations* 104.1 (Fall 2008), 99. Lye does not present this prospect in a negative light.

Maxine Hong Kingston, Feminism, and Postmodern Literature

STELLA BOLAKI

"Why must I 'represent' anyone besides myself? Why should I be denied an individual artistic vision?"

"I am nothing but who 'I' am in relation to other people. In *The Woman Warrior* 'I' begin the quest for self by understanding the archetypal mother. In *China Men*, 'I' become more whole because of the ability to appreciate the other gender."

"I want to change the world through artistic pacifist means."¹

This chapter traces the arc of Maxine Hong Kingston's career focusing on her evolving artistic and social vision. She has been a writer who has continuously enlarged her concerns and complicated her engagement with the world by keeping her work open to revision and infusing it with ethical and political responsibilities. The epigraphs I have chosen for this chapter outline some of the crucial stages in Kingston's writing, stages that are highlighted in my analysis. The first one is a rather defensive but also valid response to the burden of representativeness in light of the controversy surrounding the publication of *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1976). A composite of fiction, myth, and auto/biography, *The Woman Warrior* is the best-known Asian American text in print but was described by some Asian American critics as "a fashionably feminist work written with white acceptance in mind."² The first epigraph is juxtaposed with a passage that moves away from the more individualistic "artistic vision" and embraces a communal self that sees herself "in relation to others"; in this case Kingston's male, as opposed to merely female, ancestors who are given a central place in *China Men* (1980). The third statement, made in 1991 as Kingston was working on her peace book, is perhaps the one that best captures her deep belief in the social function of art and its ability to bring change by building communities based not on gender, family, ethnic community, or nation,

but on universal principles such as peace and love. Taken collectively, these statements reveal the forms and ethics of radical accountability that are a hallmark of Kingston's ongoing legacies.

In exploring the body of her work from *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* to her novel *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989) and her more recent books *The Fifth Book of Peace* (2003) and *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life* (2011), this chapter traces and reanimates the critical reception of her oeuvre through the multiple vantage points of Asian American studies, ethnic studies, gender studies, and theory. I start by outlining *The Woman Warrior*'s contribution to early debates about Asian American identity and cultural authenticity. I then move on to Kingston's wider reception and consider the affinities of her work to feminism and postmodernism, two of the most common ways her work has been approached, before addressing some recent interpretive frameworks that go beyond postmodernism. Rather than limiting the significance of Kingston's writing to any one of these critical paradigms, in order to appreciate her important place in Asian American literary history we need to attend to her increasingly layered complexity as a writer and cultural activist.

The Woman Warrior and the Chinese American Controversy

The critical controversy over the generic status of *The Woman Warrior* and the responsibility of the ethnic writer to his or her community has been divisive but, as Jinqi Ling is right to suggest, "has also served as a necessary precondition for renewed transformative articulations in Asian American literary creation and criticism."³ Both the white American reviewers' remarks, steeped in words such as "inscrutable," "exotic," and "mysterious oriental,"⁴ and the Asian American critics' charges that Kingston has tampered with authentic Chinese myths,⁵ miss a central point about *The Woman Warrior*, namely, that it is an *American* book about a Chinese American girl growing up in California. The text is not only about the struggle to reconcile conflicting messages emerging from the narrator's Chinese heritage and American life but also about inventing a literary form in order to represent such a struggle; or, as the narrator puts it in *The Woman Warrior*, "Those of us in the first American generations have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America."⁶ Kingston, like her young protagonist, acknowledges the importance of recuperating the

past but refuses to identify herself as an “archivist.”⁷ As she tells Timothy Pfaff in an interview:

The way I keep old Chinese myths alive is by telling them in a new American way. I can't help feeling that people who accuse me of misrepresenting the myths are looking at the past in a sentimental kind of way. It's so *easy* to look into the past. It's harder to look into the present and come to terms with what it means to be alive today.⁸

In other words, even if we accept it is possible, pursuing historical purity at the expense of the present does not serve any purpose. This is why the narrator observes about the “No Name Woman” in the first chapter that unless she can see “her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help” (16). What is particularly urgent for the American-born generation is to make such stories “relevant” to their present lives in America, and it is this demand for relevance that dictates the narrator’s “translation” of her mother’s cautionary tale, even as it raises questions of violence and betrayal.⁹ In the narrator’s version, the aunt redirects and avenges the violence of her patriarchal community by throwing her illegitimate baby into the family drinking well. Even though this revision gives more power to her aunt, Kingston concludes this section of the book with the realization that her aunt does not “always mean [her] well” (22). Like *The Woman Warrior*, *China Men* opens with a chapter “The Father from China” which provides conflicting versions of her father’s history. He either came illegally to America through Cuba by hiding in a ship or passed the immigration tests at Angel Island. In an interview Kingston notes her suspicion of oral history: “I will tell you four or five versions of a story and I ask that question: which one is true? But then I also ask: which one of these stories is most useful?”¹⁰ The added question reveals a pragmatic commitment in the face of the impossibility for unmediated access to the past that is developed further in Kingston’s work.

According to Frank Chin, however, viewing the past as malleable “is simply a device for destroying history and literature.”¹¹ His parody “The Unmanly Warrior” shows his impatience with the various distortions Kingston has inflicted, particularly on ancestral myth and language in *The Woman Warrior*: “Kingston takes a childhood chant, ‘The Ballad of Mulan’ ... and rewrites the heroine Fa Mulan, to the specs of the stereotype of the Chinese woman as a pathological white supremacist victimized and trapped in a hideous Chinese civilization. The tattoos Kingston gives Fa Mulan, to dramatize cruelty to women, actually belong to the hero Yue Fei.”¹² Kingston has acknowledged the operation of feminist revisionary mythmaking here. She

is unrepentant about her modifications: "I gave a man's myth to a woman . . . I see that as an aggressive storytelling act, and it's part of my own freedom to play with the myth."¹³ Chin's attack on such freedom, coupled with his rejection of autobiography as a "traditional tool of Christian conversion,"¹⁴ a feminized, rather than a native Chinese form and thus synonymous with "selling out," has been read by female scholars such as Elaine Kim, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, King-Kok Cheung, Leslie Bow, and others in the context of the conflict between cultural nationalism and feminism. Though not unique to Asian American culture, this conflict is particularly fraught because of the history of the Chinese Exclusion Acts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These laws condemned many immigrants to a life without children (stigmatizing them sexually), resulting in the subsequent struggle to reassert Asian American manhood by recovering and taking pride in an Asian heroic, and often violent, tradition. Kingston's (and other women writers') feminist and pacifist work repeatedly questions such models of masculinity.

Within the context of the nationalist agenda of *Aiiieeeee!* (1974), an anthology that set out to define Asian American literature as a field, Kingston has been accurately described as "virtually start[ing] a revolution within a revolution" with the publication of *The Woman Warrior*.¹⁵ Her articulation of a Chinese American *feminist* voice, a discourse critical of the patriarchal structures of ethnic communities, was interpreted as an antiethnic stance in as much as it jeopardized the united front of Asian American writers and their urgent demands for recognition. Such charges of betrayal were exacerbated considering that *The Woman Warrior*, with its preoccupation with questions of silence and voice, drew support from the mainstream feminist movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s and its past history. We see this clearly in an early chapter when the narrator compares Chinese women to slaves, echoing the rhetoric of first-wave feminism (49). *The Woman Warrior* abounds with scenes of oppression and violence against women, and in one of her outbursts in the last chapter the narrator declares her independence from her mother who stands for all the Chinese values she is determined to repudiate: "You can't stop me from talking. You tried to cut off my tongue, but it didn't work" (180).

However, rather than recasting this debate in which Kingston's work has been pervasively implicated in terms of the binary opposition between Asian American nationalist men and feminist women, we can, as Lisa Lowe argues, approach it in terms of "a struggle between the desire to essentialize ethnic identity and the fundamental condition of heterogeneous differences against which such a desire is spoken."¹⁶ Contrary to the fixed Orientalist construction

of Asians and Asian Americans but also to the “authentic,” native identity espoused by the cultural nationalists in *Aiiieeeee!* and the expanded edition *The Big Aiiieeeee!* (1991), *The Woman Warrior* presents us with a much more complex picture. All of the narrator’s experiences of China are mediated and she needs to sift through confusing fragments. As she asks, “Chinese Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?” (13). Kingston does not simply record the predicament of a hyphenated subject, namely the conflict between “Chinese” and “American,” as if these were culturally pure categories. Both are “translated texts” and so is Chinese American identity. We see this in the Fa Mu Lan story but also in the retelling of Ts’ai Yen’s story in the final chapter of the book “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe.” In the original version, Ts’ai Yen returns to China (and so do her songs, which are sung to Chinese instruments), yet Kingston’s wish to fashion a new Chinese American identity for her protagonist brings a different closure to the story. Through selective focus, Kingston changes the stress of the story to emphasize not return to the homeland, which would obviously have little to offer her American-born protagonist, but the creation of a composite song that “translated well” (186). Therefore, *The Woman Warrior* asserts that ethnic identity is constructed, performative, and dynamic, but affirms that despite the postmodern predicament of not knowing anything with certainty the process of articulating the forces that shape individual identity has begun and will go on.

Ethnic Feminist and Postmodern Practices

If *The Woman Warrior* created controversy within Asian American circles, its challenge to fixed notions of subjectivity and identity, communicated through its daring formal strategies, explains the warm reception of the book in women’s autobiography and postmodern canons. Sidonie Smith has declared that “no single work captures so powerfully the relationship of gender to genre in twentieth-century autobiography” as *The Woman Warrior*.¹⁷ Rather than the unitary subject of male autobiography, the book puts forward a relational mode of development as Kingston writes her self-story through remembering those of her maternal ancestors, both real and mythical: the no name aunt, Fa Mu Lan, Brave Orchid, Moon Orchid, and finally Ts’ai Yen. As a companion volume to *The Woman Warrior*, *China Men* continues this process by inserting Kingston into the male descent line. This attention to intersubjectivity and

dialogue between self and others is extended in such books as *To Be the Poet* (2002), *The Fifth Book of Peace*, and *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life*. In this later work Kingston expands her community outside her family or ethnic group to embrace “the big family.”¹⁸ This happens with the help of her fictional “partner” Wittman Ah Sing (the protagonist of *Tripmaster Monkey*) through whom she witnesses aspects of her own life – her move to Hawai‘i and the process of aging in the latter work – but also the Vietnam War veterans whose stories she incorporates in *The Fifth Book of Peace* as she works through the traumatic experience of reconstructing her lost-in-the-fire peace book.

In the face of the accusations of fictionalization that she has received from some Chinese American readers, Kingston celebrates her achievement to break down the hegemony of formal autobiography that relies on chronology: “I feel that it’s a mission for me to invent a new autobiographical form that truly tells the inner life of women, and I do think it’s especially important for minority people, because we’re always on the brink of disappearing.”¹⁹ Kingston does this through talk story, an important source of family and cultural memory as well as a feminist and political tool. When asked during an interview how she views a largely “white male postmodernist establishment of writers”²⁰ with whom she shares similar narrative strategies, she provides an answer that not only addresses her own work but also that of other ethnic American women writers such as Toni Morrison and Leslie Silko:

When I compare our work to some of the mainstream work, it seems as if many of them are only playing with words. The “language” people’s world seems grey and black and white. Toni’s and Leslie’s and my aliveness must come from our senses of a connection with people who have a community and a tribe. . . . Having four or five versions of your immigration [a reference to *China Men*] – that’s not just the way my head works, that’s the way narration and memory and stories work in culture. So, that’s a gift given to me by our culture, and not something that I imagined on my own. I invented new literary structures to contain multiversions and to tell the true lives of non-fiction people who are storytellers.²¹

Kingston’s comment about the danger of disappearance is pertinent to her attempt in *China Men* to insert Chinese immigrants into a national history that has rendered them invisible. Through the talk-story technique the book exposes the violence and artificiality of official history by presenting the subjective histories of the China men, both their achievements and hardship in America. These personal histories are tentative, incomplete, and often repressed by the Chinese immigrants. The book is rich in images of characters recovering their ability to speak. Bak Goong (Great Grandfather), who

is forbidden to speak on a Hawaiian plantation, resorts to talking into a hole dug in the ground. Grandfather Ah Goong shouts into the Sierra Nevada sky, seized by a socially suppressed sexual energy.²² In inheriting and (re)telling their stories, Kingston restores the voices of these silenced men and their place in both Chinese and American communities. For Kingston, then, storytelling is a social, historical, and political act rather than a metafictional strategy; a “communal” activity linked not only to the oral tradition but also to “hopeful” writing.²³ At this point in her career, storytelling is primarily a means to explore the history of her family and ethnic community, but Kingston enlarges her concerns, as we will see, to create hopeful stories about peace and a global community.

Like *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, *Tripmaster Monkey*, a novel of and about the sixties, includes many formal characteristics associated with postmodernism, such as word play, interruptions by the narrator, stories within stories, an encyclopedic allusiveness, pastiche, and parody. An excerpt from this novel is included in *Postmodern American Fiction: A Norton Anthology* (1998) under the section “Revising Tradition” because Kingston’s novel is built from compelling combinations of American and Chinese influences and from both high and popular culture. Among the Chinese sources are *Journey to the West*, *The Water Margin*, and *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, three of the most famous Chinese classical works of literature. Starting from Wittman Ah Sing’s name, a reference to Walt Whitman’s poem “Song of Myself,” the American intertexts are too numerous to list here, but there are many references and echoes of counterculture writers. The book’s subtitle (“his fake book”) not only alludes to the critical controversy surrounding Kingston’s work (Wittman has been compared to Frank Chin) but also points to improvisation as a central narrative feature of this book. A “fake book” is a compilation of standard basic melodies that jazz musicians use as the foundation for improvisation. In the same way that *Tripmaster Monkey* is a cultural mosaic pieced together from a wide range of texts, the character Wittman has been described as an example of “the constituted self that is eclectic, ephemeral, and an empty signifier moving from one theatre of action to another without serious engagement in the actualities.”²⁴

However, casting postmodernism as merely a style leads to problems that have been foregrounded within ethnic and Asian American studies in particular. David Palumbo-Liu has been a vocal critic of the unproblematic “postmodernization of Asian-American literature,” which happens when the term is “loosely applied” by evoking one or several of its formal characteristics such as hybridity or pastiche.²⁵ While exploring the affinities between

Asian American texts and postmodern or modernist literary constructions has helped Asian American critics to move beyond merely ethnographic or sociological study, Palumbo Liu emphasizes the importance of historically locating such literatures and their aesthetic modes.

Palumbo-Liu also further asks: “if all the master narratives are now suspect, all the consolidating concepts totalitarian, what about ideas of community, individual rights, justice?”²⁶ Evoking historically specific events of sixties counterculture, *Tripmaster Monkey* ends with a community-affirming event, the staging of a play, which is political and crucial for Wittman’s resistance. In that episode of the book, Wittman remembers the Chinese massacre of 1871 in Los Angeles Chinatown, when nineteen immigrants were killed, and decides that he will not participate in the Vietnam War or any other war. Thus “the protagonist’s actions are far from arbitrary pastiches of random elements – they coalesce by way of a particular regimen of political memory, of cultural work, and morally grounded commitment.”²⁷

Kingston and other ethnic writers’ work make it possible therefore to reconceive the term *postmodern* so that it is not antithetical to experience, historical reference, and agency, and to reimagine postmodern texts as reconstructive rather than merely deconstructive. This is certainly also true of a book like *China Men*, which has been read in terms of Linda Hutcheon’s notion of “historiographic metafiction.” As noted before, Kingston claims America for Chinese Americans by challenging the China men’s relegation to the margins of national history. However, the myths that punctuate her longer chapters in the book, combined with the female perspective from which the Chinese immigrant stories are told, deconstruct available versions of history making. A notable example is the vignette “On Discovery” which opens *China Men*. Tang Ao, in Kingston’s appropriation of an episode from a Chinese novel, is captured in the Land of Women, where he is forced to have his feet bound, to have his ears pierced, and be fed on women’s food.²⁸ Even though this story captures the emasculation of Chinese immigrants in America, the gender role reversal serves as an ironic commentary on the subjugation of women in both China and America. Similarly, while Kingston suggests that the China men have the right to own the land since they built America through their work in the mines and the railroad, she is equally critical of the ideas of possessive masculinity and mastery of one’s environment, as the carefully crafted scene of Ah Goong’s masturbation, when he shouts “I am fucking the world,” demonstrates.²⁹ Through her feminist and postmodern strategies Kingston thus problematizes both U.S. nationalism and male-oriented Asian American accounts of immigration history, but she

remains a history-conscious writer. As this overview of her early work shows, her writing, like that of many women and ethnic writers, has embraced a variety of experimental narrative forms but has also infused postmodernism with new ethical and political vision.

Pragmatic and Pacifist Commitments

Attempts to envisage alternative versions of radical, political, multiethnic postmodernisms have also been articulated through a renewed interest in realism in the last twenty years. Within a postpositivist realist framework that often draws on the tradition of American pragmatism and recent developments in analytic philosophy but also, as Minh T. Nguyen crucially underlines, in “the experiences and visions of people of color,”³⁰ a viable critical alternative has emerged that may shed further light on the development of Kingston’s writing. A rejection of realism, to which many Asian American critics are committed, and of the developmental narrative typical of the Bildungsroman, which Kingston’s work and commentary on her work often invoke, is problematic as it “casts in doubt almost all forms of identity formation, of the pursuit of objectivity, or of the struggle for social progress.”³¹ It also falsely assumes that innovative formal techniques are incompatible with a realist epistemology. However, Kingston’s work amply illustrates the opposite. Writing about “The Laws,” the section of “pure history” that Kingston inserts in the middle of *China Men*, Hutcheon suggests that “the general apparatus of novelistic realism is still retained” despite such metafictional self-reflexivity.³² Thus, even though it looks quite “clumsy” amidst the sophisticated narrative strategies of the rest of the book,³³ such documentary intrusion is a necessary cultural and political strategy as it addresses the mainstream culture’s ignorance of Chinese American history.

A critical framework that resituates realism under postmodernity speaks to Kingston’s evolving creative process and social vision that culminates in her pacifism, as this vision is exemplified within *and* across individual texts. Christophe Den Tandt devises a detailed literary approach to *The Woman Warrior* that shows the ways in which “pragmatic dedication constitutes one of the core constituents of such a contemporary realist outlook.”³⁴ As he explains, even though a pragmatic realist text is often defined by fragmentation and several voices, it does not abandon its point of reference, however elusive. For example, the different stories of *The Woman Warrior* disperse the narrative across several trajectories (both spatially and temporally) but they all revolve around the empowerment of Chinese American women.

A “postmodern realist” approach makes room for uncertainty *and* knowledge and thus offers a way to theorize human values and make truth claims in a manner that does not fall prey to either a debilitating relativism or absolute certainty. In *The Woman Warrior*, for instance, we follow the protagonist’s quest to order immigrant fragments, give voice to spectral family histories, and make heroic Chinese myths relevant to her “disappointing” American life (47). We witness how through such a process of translation, which makes room for errors, compromise, amendment, and revision, she grows morally and politically. This happens within and across Kingston’s different texts. Kingston has argued that even though for many readers of *The Woman Warrior* “The White Tigers” chapter is their favorite, she “put it at the beginning to show that the childish myth is past, not the climax we reach for.”³⁵ She finishes *The Woman Warrior* with an epiphanic moment through the story of Ts’ai Yen and the phrase “it translated well,” but looking forward to *China Men* we know that such a moment serves as a model for further rather than a final course of action. Kingston starts her next book with an intention to write about “the other gender.” As she puts it in an interview, “I want [my readers] to watch that woman grow up in *China Men*. I believe that in order to truly grow up, women must love men. That has to be the next stage of feminism.”³⁶

Kingston’s project of having her characters “grow up” extends to Wittman. He may create a communal ritual and miraculously transform into a pacifist at the end of *Tripmaster Monkey*, but this is not enough. The war in Vietnam is still going on and the problems of the world have clearly not been solved by staging one play. This is perhaps why the book does not end with Wittman’s performance but with a long “one man show,” his speech on ethnic stereotyping and racist representation. This closure suggests that Kingston’s protagonist is not satisfied with merely one show and that there is more work to be done. In an interview, she adds that if she could manage to make Wittman “grow up a whole, good, effective, socially responsible man, then maybe . . . I will make Huck Finn, Tom Sawyer and Holden Caulfield – all those American adolescent heroes – [grow up].”³⁷ Taking on this challenge, *The Fifth Book of Peace* (chapter 3 entitled “Water”) shows Wittman relocating to Hawai‘i to avoid being drafted, becoming older (including becoming a father), and trying to embody the standards of pacifism that his idealistic younger self set in the previous book. Wittman also reappears in *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life*. This time he is middle-aged and has left his wife to “see for [him]self [his] own true China.”³⁸ His maturation in this text partly entails working through and revising his idealized image of China as he witnesses scenes of poverty, inequality, and violence.

Revisability and intertextual dialogue are central characteristics of Kingston's work and, rather than corresponding to an empty postmodern game, suggest a kind of "writerly pragmatism," or a way of growing as a writer as well as a particular strategy for pursuing activist concerns.³⁹ Such writerly pragmatism ranges, as we have seen, from experimenting with multiple genres – her recent foray being poetry – to doing "rewrites" by exercising the storyteller's ancient right to modify stories.⁴⁰ Some of her corrections and amendments seem to have come from Kingston's visits to China even though she felt reassured that the country she had imagined was not that different.

However, most of her revisions of previous stories relate to her pacifism, which Helena Grice calls her "possibly greatest legacy as a writer."⁴¹ In yet another version of the controversial Fa Mu Lan myth (whose name she now spells Fa Mook Lan), for example, Kingston changes the emphasis from warfare to peaceful homecoming, which shows how a war veteran can transform herself into a nurturing, feminine, and more humane being. As she has explained, she wanted to move beyond the adolescent story of *The Woman Warrior* to address the "middle of life and even the end of life."⁴² The retelling, which is given at the end of both *To Be the Poet* and *The Fifth Book of Peace*, opens with the onomatopoeic word "Jik jik jik" which presents Fa Mook Lan as a weaver and connects her to female figures such as Penelope from *The Odyssey*. As Kingston notes, she should have included that information earlier, when she wrote *The Woman Warrior*, but she "was at a different stage of feminism at that time."⁴³ The nature of feminism has undoubtedly changed since 1976 – one of the most important developments is the alliance of feminism(s) with other social movements for change – and Kingston's more recent work, with its pacifist focus, has an important place in these developments.

It is not accidental, then, that the Fa Mu Lan revision appears in a book – *The Fifth Book of Peace* – which is not only concerned with ageing (Kingston had turned sixty when it was published) but that can be read as a manifesto about the social function of art and as a formulation of an ethics of responsibility. This book embodies Kingston's pacifist praxis, especially through the writing and meditation workshops she organized for the war veterans in the pragmatic acknowledgment that "things that fiction can't solve must be worked out in life" (241). In the part "Earth" of the book Kingston mentions that she received many letters from war veterans who had heard of the loss of her only copy of her manuscript-in-process *The Fourth Book of Peace* following a massive fire in the Oakland-Berkeley hills in 1991. One of the veterans who wrote to her refers to "women [as] the way home" for many of these men (248), thus evoking the figure of Fa Mook Lan who brings her male army home. *The Fifth*

Book of Peace describes Kingston's preparation and first meeting with the veterans, which led to a long engagement with their traumatic stories and the creation of a writing community of peace. What is significant about this pacifist work, and the ways her writing has addressed the suffering of both Americans and their victims during the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, and subsequent wars after the 9/11 attacks, is that Kingston has expanded her commitment to community, confirming the following process of development: "first there is an awareness of the ego, the self, and then of another and many others to become a communal person. And we need to go even beyond that – our family, tribe, Chinatown, gang, nation – into a larger selflessness or *agape*. I think it is a very rare person who will take on public and global responsibilities."⁴⁴

However, Kingston's interest in peace extends to how peace can be written about in fiction; just as her previous work invents a style to do justice to the complexities of the Chinese American experience (female and male), she has emphasized the need, especially among feminist writers, to rethink "the shape of the novel" which "is violent because we have violent confrontations – [then] a denouement where things explode."⁴⁵ Her subsequent memoir-poem *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life* – the title taken from a line of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* – offers many moments of political activism and "civil disobedience." A scene from this book that captures Kingston's idea of "nonviolent drama"⁴⁶ is the protest against the Iraq war on International Women's Day 2003. The scene ends with Kingston's arrest together with other protesting members of CODEPINK, an activist women's group distinguished for their sustained commitment to feminist, progressive causes, in front of the White House: "How can it be that all the cops are men, / and all for Peace women?" (141)

Despite these protests, which Kingston describes as "a theater of peace" (echoing the closure of *Tripmaster Monkey*), the war did not stop. Kingston's response is: "I wanted to lie down / and die but did not. I do believe: Because / the world protested, the tonnage of bombs was not as / massive as planned" (151); or, as she puts it earlier in the same book, "An act / of love I do this morning [going to the protest] saves a life / on a far future battlefield" (18). This may sound like a wish fulfilment, yet another of the happy endings that she privileges in this and other work. In *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life*, she not only revisits the Fa Mu Lan story from *The Woman Warrior* but also the "No Name Woman" story. The aunt was said to have drowned in the village well and therefore haunted the family, but in this book the ghost is appeased by a ceremony. Kingston is offered water from the very same well her aunt drowned in by "a strange old lady": "I hope / she means to be making ceremony; I shall / take it to be shriving. The bad we did / be over ... Curse

lifted. / War over" (171). In a 2007 reading at the University of California, Irvine, Kingston explained that the verb "to thrive" means "to write" but also "to make atonement" (this reminds us of the use of revenge/report at the end of "White Tigers" in *The Woman Warrior* as well as of the multiple meanings of "jik" added in the recycling of the Fa Mu Lan story in *The Fifth Book of Peace*: weave/knit and heal).⁴⁷ To "make ceremony" or to "tell the story until a happy ending" (329) is once again Kingston's answer to war. Because of such authorial comments, *The Fifth Book of Peace* has been criticized for exhibiting "unreal utopianism" and "the need to sanitize and happyfy."⁴⁸

But Kingston's happy endings are not final as she gives us a motto for action rather than a closure. The concluding words of *The Fifth Book of Peace* read:

The images of peace are ephemeral. The language of peace is subtle. The reasons for peace, the definitions of peace, the very idea of peace *have to be invented, and invented again*. Children, everybody, here's what to do during war: In a time of destruction, create something. A poem. A parade. A community. A school. A vow. A moral principle. One peaceful moment. (402, emphasis added)

The importance placed on inventiveness here can be approached in terms of what José David Saldivar describes as a commitment to "a larger politics of the possible."⁴⁹ Rather than postmodernist skepticism, in the preceding passages Kingston expresses trust that things can change provided that she continues to create stories. As we reach the end of the journey of tracing the arc of her career to date, she affirms her continuing commitment to this struggle and to "pragmatic universals" such as love and peace, which "need not alarm us."⁵⁰ In the epilogue of *The Fifth Book of Peace* where she explains what happened to the veteran writing workshops after the 9/11 events – a time when she is advised to be "sensitive" to a climate of patriotism⁵¹ – Kingston does not relinquish such ideals: "Peace leads us. Moral principles do not change" (399).

Reviewing Kingston's literary and political legacies looking back to the controversy over *The Woman Warrior* and the question of the ethnic writer's representativeness, and irrespective of whether we share the view that "moral universalism" can respond to the present and future concerns of Asian American studies,⁵² David Leiwei Li's view remains prescient: "[Kingston] has channelled the burden of collectivity, notably her writing's speaking *for* effect, into new avenues of creativity. By firmly anchoring herself in multiple subjective positions from which to speak, she is able to speak *to* constituencies past, present and future, at once preserving and imagining communities of memory."⁵³ In light of this, Kingston's declaration at the end of *I Love a Broad Margin to My*

Life, which she claims will be her last book, is striking: “That desire [writing] is going way. /I’ve said what I have to say. I’ll stop . . . /Become reader of the world, /no more writer of it.” And yet, isn’t this another – perhaps extreme for a writer –instance of embracing the kind of larger selflessness and community she increasingly affirms through her writing?

... When I complete
This sentence, I shall begin taking
My sweet time to love the moment-to-moment
Beauty of everything. Every one. Enow. (221)⁵⁴

Notes

- 1 Maxine Hong Kingston, “Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers,” in *Asian and Western Writers in Dialogue: New Cultural Identities*, ed. Guy Amirthanayagam (London: Macmillan, 1982), 63; Kingston, “Personal Statement,” in *Approaches to Teaching Kingston’s The Woman Warrior*, ed. Shirley Geok-lin Lim (New York: MLA, 1991), 23; Donna Perry, “Maxine Hong Kingston,” in *Conversations with Maxine Hong Kingston*, ed. Paul Skenazy and Tera Martin (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1998), 168.
- 2 Benjamin Tong, “Critic of Admirer Sees Dumb Racist,” *San Francisco Journal* (May 11, 1977): 20.
- 3 Jinqi Ling, *Narrating Nationalisms: Ideology and Form in Asian American Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 114.
- 4 Kingston, “Cultural Mis-readings,” 55.
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PART IV
★
CANONS

The Emergence of Asian American Literature as an Academic Field

VIET THANH NGUYEN

Although American writers of Asian descent were writing in English and other languages since at least the late nineteenth century, an “Asian American literature” would not be possible until 1968 and the coining of the term *Asian American* by student activists. The Asian American rubric both drew from the ethnic legacies of earlier generations and collected those efforts under a name, giving them a coherence they did not have before. But instead of speaking to the diverse ethnic literary works that predated 1968, “Asian American literature” refers in this chapter to the idea, category, and field of Asian American literature that emerges after this year. Examining Asian American literature from 1968 until the present, what readers encounter is a body of literature and ways of thinking about that literature that have grown rapidly in content, complexity, and contradiction. These characteristics are likely true of any large body of literature that has been pulled together around one criterion, because the texts in such a body could be categorized in a diversity of fashions. In the case of Asian American literature, however, the content, complexity, and contradiction have another interesting connotation, which is that they emerge from and serve as an index for the changes in Asian American populations. As these populations have transformed demographically, culturally, politically, economically, and generationally, so has the literature and its challenges.

From the late 1960s through the mid-1990s, Asian American literature was in its emergent phase, as was the Asian American name. Not only were the literature and the name emergent, they were also insurgent, their advocates seeing the literature and the name as expressive of a minority’s urgent political identity. *Aiiieeeee!*, the title of the groundbreaking 1974 Asian American literary anthology, captures this urgency and insurgency. The editors Frank Chin, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong set out to establish the existence of an Asian American literary lineage, and in so doing sketched out the first outlines of an Asian American literary canon that included Sui Sin Far, John Okada, and Carlos Bulosan. Besides identifying authors of Asian

descent and grouping them under the collective rubric of Asian American literature, the authors explicitly imbued that rubric with intense political and cultural meaning. Asian American literature's importance came from its capacity to speak for Asian American populations that had previously been spoken for by dominant American society in ways that ranged from extremes of "racist hate" to "racist love." Racist hate, they argued, was the form of violent domination directed at troublesome minorities, notably African Americans. Racist love, in contrast, was reserved for more docile minorities like Asian Americans, who would willingly participate in their own co-optation into a racially stratified society by accepting their subordinated place as a model minority. The tropes of self-representation, speaking out, breaking silence, and claiming voice inhered in the anthology's framing and would become common, powerful tropes in Asian American literature as a whole. They were also, of course, found in Asian American cultures in general. These tropes had both aesthetic and political meaning, and found strategic corollaries in the explicitly political realm of community organizing, labor movements, grassroots activism, electoral politics, and economic entrepreneurship that shaped Asian American community formation.

From its beginning, Asian American literature's framing by its critics – in this case, *Aiiieeeee!*'s editors – linked the literature to social contexts. But the tropes and strategies of self-representation, speaking out, breaking silence, and claiming voice came with complications, as Maxine Hong Kingston showed in her foundational 1976 text, *The Woman Warrior*. The book begins with an injunction from the narrator's mother to the narrator: she must not tell anyone what her mother is about to tell her. Since the narrator proceeds to do exactly that, *The Woman Warrior* is predicated on the dangers of storytelling and its ethical problems. These problems include speaking up about situations in which others are involved and speaking for others in one's own name. Much of Asian American literature does both those actions, with writers often interested in writing about underrepresented, suppressed, or forgotten historical events, or writing about their own families and communities, who may not want to be written about. These communities may even reject the label "Asian American" as being too broad and not sufficiently explanatory of their experiences as members of a specific ethnic group contending with the harsh realities of a dominant white majority population. In other words, the aesthetic act of representing, or speaking for, has political and ethical complications and tensions between the represented and the author or artist who supposedly represents them. The author or artist becomes an informal spokesperson either through an explicit claim to doing so or through being appointed, or

seen as, a representative of a certain population by the readership or audience of the aesthetic work. In this way, Asian American literature becomes symptomatic of a fundamental tension in Asian American cultures: Who are Asian Americans and who speaks for Asian Americans?

Emergent to Established

The divide between the author or artist as a representative and the ethnic population whom they supposedly represent is found within Asian American literary criticism as well – in this case, between the critic who represents and the writers or the texts who become represented by the critic. This relationship is arguably one of the reasons for the rapid rise of Asian American literature as a category, for the Asian American literary critic has played a key role in defining that category and making it visible as an academic subject. While a writer like Amy Tan is certainly much more well-known than any critic of Asian American literature, and has opened the marketing doors for a subsequent generation of Asian American writers, her mainstream readers may not necessarily see her as an “Asian American writer” or her books as “Asian American literature.” Academic criticism’s power has been to give legitimacy and shape to the category of Asian American literature, in partnership with the accomplishments of Asian American writers, even those whose works are seen ambivalently by Asian American literary critics, such as Tan or Bharati Mukherjee, writers who do not claim to be Asian American authors. That relationship between the criticism and the literature has thus been marked by unease and disagreements over what constitutes Asian American literature, who is an Asian American writer, and whether the category of being Asian American is enabling or limiting for authors, readers, and critics.

The first major academic work to define Asian American literature was Elaine Kim’s 1984 *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Contexts*. Less polemical than *Aiiieeeee!*, Kim’s book laid the foundation for the academic study of Asian American literature, which has been marked by a sobriety and restraint that is, perhaps, a necessity for academic respectability. In contrast to the polemical, visceral language of *Aiiieeeee!*, academic Asian American literary criticism has by now been absorbed completely into academic conventions of methodology and discourse. The political and polemical tendencies of Asian American literary criticism are not eliminated in the academy, but are generally only rewarded if expressed through rarefied language – what I consider to be sober and restrained – that circulates poorly outside of academia. Restraint, of course, is a relative term. Asian American

literary criticism is restrained in relationship to creative writing, but not as restrained as contemporary literary critical modes that are fixed on canonical literatures. Within an academic context, the Asian American literary criticism pioneered by Kim was disruptive in terms of introducing an entirely new body of writers and texts to consider. The importance of Kim's book lies in how it gives presence and shape to this body of work, and identifies it as deserving of further study in an inhospitable and indifferent academic environment. Indeed, the arrival of Asian American literature into the academy took place at a moment when feminist and minority critics of all kinds were demanding greater representation and inclusion in the literary canon, and were being met with increasingly hostile responses. The 1980s and early 1990s were marked by "culture wars" between the defenders of the Western canon and by advocates of those excluded from that canon. In this climate, Kim's book played a key role in identifying Asian American literature as one site of this conflict over representation, inclusion, and literary value.

In this emergent phase of Asian American literature and its criticism, representation, inclusion, and literary value were bound together by an antiexclusionary dynamic, which was the act of "claiming America," in Kingston's words. So long excluded from American history and culture, Asian American writers and critics were mostly agreed on the importance of asserting how they belonged in and to the United States. Asian, in this case, was only an adjective for American. Most of the major Asian American literary critical works that came after Kim implicitly or explicitly agreed to these national boundaries for Asian American literary studies. This was the case with Sau-ling C. Wong's *Reading Asian American Literature*, a textured, nuanced close reading of key literary works. Wong described Asian American literature as an "emergent and evolving textual coalition whose interests it is the business of a professional coalition of Asian American critics to promote."¹ Wong's work has proved prescient, both in its formalistic concerns and its awareness of the professional nature of Asian American literary criticism. Formalistic approaches, overshadowed for much of this emergent phase, have come to the foreground in the twenty-first century, as we will see in the following text. Meanwhile, the growth of both Asian American literature and criticism is at least partially due to the professionalization of a generation of graduate students who trained in the 1990s as these pioneering works of Kim and Wong came out and defined the field.

If that field was nationally constrained, it was not without some blurriness and controversy. King-Kok Cheung's *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa* identified an important trope in the literature

and affirmed the centrality of her chosen authors to an Asian American canon, but it also expanded the category of Asian American to Asian North American by including the Canadian Kogawa. The aesthetic power of Kogawa's novel *Obasan* meant that Asian American literary critics were eager for any reason to have the chance to discuss it, but once the boundaries of America expanded northward beyond the United States, legitimate questions could be asked as to where the boundaries ended. Should not America also extend southward to include Latin American countries, which had significant Asian populations? Implicit in this question was the problem of defining Asian American literature and, through it, Asian American identity. Should the literature and identity be nationally defined? Linguistically defined? Racially defined? Politically defined? Wong would argue for the importance of reading Chinese American literature in Chinese ("Ethnicizing Gender"), while also claiming national identity in her essay "Denationalization Reconsidered," basing her position on the political necessity and stakes involved in the struggle for inclusion and legitimacy within the United States. Susan Koshy's sharp critique of Wong's argument in "The Fiction of Asian American Literature," wherein she asserted the importance of the transnational to Asian American studies, signaled that the nationalist orientation of Asian American literary criticism, which had been present since *Aiiieeeee!*, would no longer go uncontested, although it would continue to be important in works like David Li's *Imagining the Nation*, Jinqi Ling's *Narrating Nationalisms*, and Rachel Lee's *The Americas of Asian American Literature*.

One of the most pivotal works in Asian American literary criticism, Lisa Lowe's *Immigrant Acts*, was also primarily focused on the nation and the excluded Asian immigrant. More important than the national frame, however, was the strong theoretical argument advanced by Lowe for the political function of Asian American literature and Asian immigrant cultures. In Lowe's thesis, contradictions of race and class that led to the exclusion of Asian immigrants in the United States also led to the capacity of Asian immigrant cultures to be critical of their exclusion. This thesis would prove persuasive, and arguably marks the end of the emergent phase of Asian American literary criticism. Until Lowe's book, Asian American literary criticism had lacked a strong theoretical argument that would pull together the field's political and aesthetic concerns. By providing that theoretical argument, Lowe's book would be a strong influence on subsequent criticism for at least a decade, not least because it provided the field with a theoretical model that showed Asian American literature to be a form of resistance against the various kinds of domination and exclusion experienced by Asian immigrants. Her book

inaugurated a rich period of publication in Asian American literary criticism that could be called the establishment phase, where the graduate students of the 1990s would become the professors of the following decade, publishing as many monographs in a few years as in the first couple of decades of Asian American literary criticism.

This growth in Asian American literary criticism roughly paralleled the growth in Asian American literature, which was even more pronounced. While the publication of a novel or memoir by an Asian American writer in the 1980s and 1990s was an event to be heralded, by the first decade of the twenty-first century the production of prose was practically routine. Asian American poets, operating in a different economy of smaller costs and smaller returns, had generally published more prolifically than prose writers, and had received a fair measure of critical acclaim, but their works had also drawn less mainstream commercial attention. It was in the realm of prose that Asian American literature became an economic and cultural niche in the literary marketplace, and it was through critical attention to novels and memoirs that Asian American literary criticism tended to make its arguments. Narratives allowed Asian American literary critics to exercise the kinds of critical arguments that were important to the field, which were generally about history, politics, or sociology, and were at least tinged with those contextual concerns. Aesthetics were important, but usually in the service of these worldly matters. The critical orientation toward context was matched by a readerly attention as well, for it was arguably the case that part of the reason for Asian American literature's ascent was that audiences wanted some type of contextual information. As Asian American writers often complained, their works were often expected to provide historical, sociological, or cultural information for their audiences, both Asian American and non-Asian American. While Asian American literary critics were much more sensitive than that, it could be argued that their modes of literary criticism also treated the literature instrumentally to a certain extent. That is, the criticism oftentimes looked to the literature to prove political points.

What accounted for this parallel rise in publication for both the literature and the criticism, which also helped to establish the validity of an Asian American literature through the amassing of sheer numbers of texts and interpretations? The cultural environment was ripe in the 1980s and 1990s, for as a consequence of the new social movements of the 1960s American society as a whole was more open to reading about minority cultures and differences. It was also arguably the case that American society was, in general, more willing to read about difference and inequality than to engage in political changes

to ameliorate inequality and injustice. Asian American literature, then, occupied an ambiguous position. It told stories about difference and inequality and was studied by its critics for its capacity for political provocation, but its ability to bring about political and economic change was debatable, especially if the literature was read through what David Palumbo-Liu calls a “model minority discourse.”² This discourse foregrounded the problem of identity in Asian American literature as a crisis of cultural conflict that could be healed and contained, versus reading Asian American literature as both an outcome and also a critique of inequality and injustice.

This ambiguity about whether the literature was about manageable cultural difference or unsettling political critique was matched by the ambiguity in the significance of the rise of an Asian American literary class. The Asian American literary class tends to see itself as engaging in unsettling political critique, even as their material success and increasing institutional visibility suggests a degree of co-optation and investment in the manageable problem of cultural difference. This rising literary class was the other major reason why Asian American literature and literary criticism became so prolific in the late 1990s and into the twenty-first century. The literature and literary criticism became prolific because there were more Asian Americans trained in those fields by the 1990s, graduating from MFA and PhD programs in significant numbers. The writers produced notable novels (Chang-Rae Lee’s *Native Speaker*, Ruth Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats*, Jessica Hagedorn’s *Dogeaters*), short story collections (Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies*, Don Lee’s *Yellow*, Gish Jen’s *Who’s Irish?*), and poetry collections or anthologies (Garrett Hongo’s *The Open Boat*, Suji Kwock Kim’s *Notes from the Divided Country*, Cathy Park Hong’s *Dance Dance Revolution*), and the critics produced critical books (Patricia Chu’s *Assimilating Asians*; Viet Thanh Nguyen’s *Race and Resistance*; Rajini Srikanth’s *The World Next Door*). Their presence in academe – and the texts cited here are only a sampling – was a direct consequence of changes in immigration policy in 1965 that opened the doors for large numbers of Asian immigrants to come, have children, and send them to college. These literary writers and critics were, in effect, part of the so-called model minority. While the model minority stereotype presented Asian Americans as technically proficient scientists, mathematicians, engineers, and doctors, Asian American academic achievement extended to the humanities as well. Thus, while it was rare to see an Asian American in a top MFA or PhD program in the 1970s or 1980s, by the 1990s and the twenty-first century it was not unusual at all, a delayed consequence of the social engineering enacted by 1965’s immigration reform.³

The proliferating numbers of literary critics and the proliferating numbers of literary texts for them to work on meant that by the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, Asian American literary criticism had established a foothold in American academe, either in English departments or ethnic studies programs. This was a tenuous foothold, for in most cases there was no more than one Asian Americanist in an English department, and the presence of Asian American literary criticism varied regionally, with its stronghold in California. While scholars like Kim, Wong, Cheung, and Lowe constituted the first generation of Asian American literary scholars, the professors that published books in the late 1990s and the twenty-first century were the second generation, many having studied with or been mentored by the first generation, or at least benefitting from their pioneering works. This second generation, in turn, has mentored an emerging third generation of graduate students who are becoming professors and writing books. Slowly, tenuously or not, the field of Asian American literary criticism is being institutionalized and disciplined. The positive outcome of such a process is the increasing visibility of the field, the marketability of its books, and the attraction of its object to those who are not Asian American or who are not specialists in Asian American literature. More non-Asian Americans and non-Asian Americanists are examining Asian American literature, which further legitimates the literature and its study. Meanwhile, the larger numbers of critics and their professionalization means that the number of texts and methods has increased. If, from the 1970s to the 1990s, a core set of Asian American texts could be identified that all critics should know, along with a limited theoretical and methodological range that helped unify the field, are those common factors still true with the proliferation of the field's practitioners?

One way to describe the transition from the emergent phase of Asian American literary criticism from the 1970s to the 1990s and the established phase that happens afterward is by thinking of that transition as one from the ideologically driven criticism discussed previously to an institutionally driven criticism. In the institutional moment, the legacy of the field's ideological commitments is still influential, but equally influential are the demands of the profession and the discipline. Tenure, publication, and the academic star system, with their concomitant expectations of and rewards for scholars that demonstrate mastery over disciplinary norms, methods, and theories, have shaped the language and discourse of Asian American literary criticism. Today, that criticism, marked by the concerns and styles of academic Marxism, poststructuralism, postcolonial theory, feminism, and psychoanalysis, is far

removed from the bristling vernacular of *Aiiieeeee!* This institutionalization of Asian American literary criticism both entrenches and advances the field, and hence its object of study, Asian American literature, but not without cost. Like many other aspects of Asian American life, Asian American literary criticism's trajectory from the 1960s until the present has been one of decreasing radicalism and increasing professionalism, a movement from revolution as a model of radical transformation to networking as a model of incremental change.⁴ While the professed theoretical intent of much Asian American literary criticism remains politically progressive, even radical, those intentions are couched within an academic language. The theories that are enunciated in this academic language are powerful and insightful, and have done much to drive Asian American literary criticism's interventions; but those same theories and language also advance critical careers while arguably domesticating, blunting, or at least containing the political power of the critical ideas. The ideological and the institutional tendencies of Asian American literary criticism are thus two sources of enablement and contradiction for the field, with the third being ontological.

Defining Asian America

The ontological is at the heart of Asian American literature and literary criticism, both of which are premised on the existence of something or someone called an Asian American. But what or who is an Asian American, and what relationship does that person or subject have to literature? The relationship is important, for the consensus among those who are interested in the definition of Asian American literature seems to be that it is written by and about Asian Americans. This is rarely stated, but it is evidenced in the texts that are chosen for critical discussion, included in syllabi, or given awards. Notable books about Asian Americans but not by them – David Guterson's bestselling *Snow Falling on Cedars* or Robert Olen Butler's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* – are not Asian American literature by these criteria, even if they do not seem to differ formally from quite a few examples of Asian American literature (i.e., if one did not know the identity of these authors as one read these books, one might have a hard time distinguishing them from books written by Asian Americans). The ideological argument about the need for Asian American authors in Asian American literature is reasonable enough, although the urgency of that claim may be lessened now that there are so many Asian American authors publishing. But what about Asian American authors who do not write about Asian Americans, as more of

them are doing, including, for example, Chang-rae Lee (*Aloft*), Susan Choi (*My Education*), and Bill Cheng (*Southern Cross the Dog*)? They write about white Americans and black Americans, or have casts of varied racial backgrounds. These questions are hardly crippling for Asian American literature and its criticism, because if the emergent phase of the criticism was intent on foregrounding the voices of Asian Americans speaking about Asian Americans, in the establishment phase a greater degree of flexibility about what Asian American literature covers, and who can write it, is being evinced by both writers and critics. One possible future of Asian American literature is that the success of its most renowned authors, like Jhumpa Lahiri, will erode the distinction between Asian American literature and American literature, or other kinds of global literatures. In this way, the literature is also an expression of the assimilability and acceptability of Asian Americans in the twenty-first century, versus their excluded and ambivalent statuses from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

This assimilability and acceptability are possibly fraught, given that all it will take is a war with China to dampen the positive image of Asian Americans among other Americans, just as the so-called War on Terror has made some Americans paranoid about South Asian Americans. Economic competition with Asia already casts a shadow on the assimilability and acceptability of some Asian Americans. But that economic competition is a part of an age where Asian powers are rising and where more and more Asians and Asian Americans traffic between Asia and the Americas, including writers and critics. Whereas Asian American literary critics in the emergent phase were mostly committed to claiming America, more and more critics of the establishment phase are recognizing that turning to Asia and examining the fluidity between Asia and the Americas – and participating in it themselves – is not to be feared out of some anxiety about being tainted with Orientalist perceptions. Instead, confronting the already globalized nature of Asian immigration and Asian American formation is a necessity, especially as writers have long explored transpacific circulation. Early-twentieth-century notables who wrote about both Asia and America include Carlos Bulosan (*America Is in the Heart*) and Young-hill Kang (*East Goes West*), while contemporary writers who create border-defying narratives include Karen Tei Yamashita (*Tropic of Orange*), Monique Truong (*Book of Salt*), Miguel Syjuco (*Ilustrado*), Tao Lin (*Taipei*), and Andrew X. Pham (*Catfish and Mandala*), to name just a few.

Just as the boundaries between Asian American and American literature may be getting more porous, so may the borders between Asian American

and Asian literature, or at least Asian audiences. Linh Dinh can write in both Vietnamese and English, Jessica Hagedorn code-switches with Taglish, and presumably numerous American-based writers write in Asian languages, their texts circulating in their ethnic enclaves and countries of origin. Meanwhile, Chinese literary critics are increasingly interested in Asian American literature, although that attention so far has focused on Chinese American literature. Their interests are rather different than U.S. critics, for they seem to be more interested in the ethnic quality of the Chinese American literature that they are connected to by ancestry rather than the racial or panethnic quality of Asian American literature. But in the establishment phase of Asian American literary criticism, as it is taken up by practitioners in Taiwan, Korea, Japan, Germany, Spain, Poland, and perhaps elsewhere, the breakdown of the ideological consensus about Asian American literature and its canon that is found in the emergent phase has already taken place. For non-U.S. critics, Asian American literature can be many things, not only a political form of writing about racial exclusion and claims to political and cultural citizenship. All these developments challenge the U.S.-centricity of Asian American literary criticism, but they should be welcomed, serving as they hopefully do to invigorate the field and transform it. Future versions of Asian American literature may be both by *or* about Asian Americans, rather than by and about. If so, what Asian American literary criticism covers will also differ. Regardless of what the changes are, the contemporary challenges to U.S.-centric Asian American literary criticism should force it to confront its basic assumptions about ideology, canonicity, and identity.

The most basic of these assumptions lies in the definition of an Asian American. So the question returns: What or who is an Asian American? Ontologically, the problem for Asian American literary criticism lies in the difference between the biological, or essential, and the fictional, or poststructural. On the one hand, contemporary Asian American literary criticism, from Lowe and onto writings by Kandice Chuh (*imagine otherwise*), Christopher Lee (*The Semblance of Identity*), and Stephen Sohn (*Racial Asymmetries*), among others, acknowledge that the Asian American is a fictional construction that is nevertheless real and crucial. On the other hand, the field returns to the biological by privileging this Asian American subject as the source and reference for Asian American literature, a source and reference created by the historical pressures of anti-Asian racism and Orientalism. But the more the field loosens the grip of the biological by stressing the fictional or poststructural qualities of the Asian American subject, or the more it opens itself to non-Asian Americans writing about Asian Americans, or

Asian Americans writing about non-Asian Americans, the less coherent and meaningful the category of Asian American literature becomes. The pivot between the ideological and the institutional modes of Asian American literary criticism lies here at the ontological.

Not coincidentally, this pivot is also marked by ethnic and national differences that bring into relief ontological problems and assumptions. The coherent, unified ideological phase of Asian American literary criticism was possible partly because of how Asian America was dominated, through the 1970s, by people of East Asian descent and immigrant background (Japanese and Chinese Americans, and, to a lesser extent, Korean Americans). Filipinos were more ambiguous, a visible population through the twentieth century to whom the immigrant model did not easily apply, as Oscar Campomanes asserted by offering an exilic model to read Filipino American literature. Demographic changes that brought increasing numbers of South and Southeast Asians to the United States in the 1970s and onward coincided with the institutionalization of the literature, so that even as the literature has proliferated, so have the ethnic diversity and the theoretical perspectives that derive from historical experiences. Lavina Shankar and Rajini Srikanth thus felt it necessary to title their anthology of South Asians in Asian America *A Part, Yet Apart*. South Asians wanted to be included in the Asian American coalition, and were wanted in return, but numerous factors from appearance to religion to culture to history made that inclusion an uneasy one. As the cases of South Asians, Arab Americans, and Muslims make clear, the (anti) Orientalism that unified Asian American literary criticism was actually subtended by an unmarked East Asian bias and an assumed conflation of East Asian identities with Asian American identities.

From an ideological point of view, this ontological bias toward East Asians led to a redirection of Edward Said's work away from what his *Orientalism* was mostly concerned about, the Orient as the "Middle East" and "Near East," rather than the "Far East" that was the origin for Japanese, Chinese, and Korean Americans. In the post-9/11 era of a war-committed America, a reconsideration of what Asian American studies is and should do, and what Orientalism is about, has been undertaken by South Asian, Arab American, and Muslim scholars, which both invigorates Asian American studies but also brings into question its unity and whether it is the best formation to address the political questions raised by the War on Terror. Wartime America has also made more visible the experiences of Southeast Asians, whose refugee paradigms are also potentially different from immigrant models, and whose experiences with communist revolution and American war can also lead to

a theoretically different take on Asian American politics and culture. While Asian American studies sees itself as antiwar and proleft, for example, a good number of Southeast Asians are sympathetic to the War on Terror (which they see as an extension of Cold War efforts to “defend freedom”) and hostile to Marxism. Thus, the “Vietnam War” – fought in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia – is not simply another historical event in Asian American history but is a paradigmatic moment that signals divergent theoretical views and an ideological problem for Asian America.⁵ East Asian Americans opposed the Vietnam War as an imperialist, racist war, and praised Southeast Asian revolutionaries; the Southeast Asians that actually came to the United States tended to be anticommunist, and their politics, practices, and literature have expressed that bias. While these increasing numbers of Southeast Asian and South Asian Americans have been a boon to Asian America in terms of its political clout and its ability to gain institutional power, they have also complicated Asian American views on politics, theory, and ideology through their diversity and historical experiences.

While the ideological mode was coherent and focused because of a consensus around ideology and a reliance on the biological or essential definitions of Asian American identity, the institutional mode’s strength is found in greatly expanding the possibilities of Asian American literature, at the expense of its political focus and force. While there are still Asian American literary critics writing in the ideological mode, looking at the literature for political symptoms and treating critical discourse as a form of political activism, there are also others now interested in questions of aesthetics and formalism, as well as archival issues of discovery and literary history. These approaches are not necessarily unideological, but their primary commitment is not to the ideological issues that drive *Immigrant Acts*, to name the most important text of the ideological approach. A rise of interest in poetry and poetics is also an expression of Asian American literary criticism’s institutionalization, as the critics mine new territory in search of unread or underread texts, and seek to deploy traditional methodologies like close reading. Then there are approaches that place Asian American literature in juxtaposition with other literatures, a comparative model that breaks down the solid distinction found in the Asian American literary category and in Asian American literary criticism. What does one call a critic who reads not only Asian American literature but also other kinds of literature? All these changes in the field, method, and content of Asian American literary criticism take place not in isolation but in relation to Asian American culture more generally and its place in the United States, alongside other

populations, and against the backdrop of Asia. Asian American culture is becoming more diffuse, more widespread, more unpredictable, and less politically or ideologically coherent. At the same time, this condition may also lead politically motivated Asian Americans to find common cause with like-minded colleagues who are not Asian American. This move from identity politics to a politics of cause or collaboration may also be evident in Asian American literary criticism, where critics with an ideological orientation may find less use in focusing solely on the Asian American literary critical label, including David Eng (*The Feeling of Kinship*), Daniel Kim (*Writing Manhood in Black and Yellow*), and Anne Cheng (*The Melancholy of Race*).

Given these challenges and contradictions in the ideological, institutional, and ontological bases of Asian American literary criticism, what are the effects on what scholars and critics choose to read? In the emergent, ideological moment of Asian American literary criticism, there was a canon, or at least a de facto one. On its list would be Sui Sin Far, Carlos Bulosan, John Okada, Hisaye Yamamoto, Frank Chin, and Maxine Hong Kingston, to name some of the more obvious authors of what we might call a “legacy” canon. The relative ease of identifying a group of texts that all critics and readers of the literature should know was due to the relative paucity of the literature itself in the 1960s through 1980s. But in the institutionalized phase of Asian American literature and literary criticism, with the model minority expansion of the writerly and critical ranks, the large choice of texts means that defining a canon or a common core of readings is much more difficult and problematic. Some of the authors mentioned here – such as Lahiri, Chang-rae Lee, David Henry Hwang, or John Yau – might be candidates for canonization because of their mainstream critical and commercial success. Because of this success, these latter authors blur the line between “minority” and “majority” writer, to some extent, and in so doing, show the perils, or at least problems, for Asian American literature as it becomes successful in this fashion. For what made the legacy texts of Asian American literature politically compelling, if not always aesthetically interesting, was their unreservedly minor and racialized status in relationship to American literature and culture. But an Asian American literature with an increasing number of authors who could simply be called American or world authors loses this minor and racialized status. This literature comes closer and closer to being an ethnic rather than racial literature, with the typical promise of assimilation into American culture that is attached to being called ethnic. This, of course, can be a very good thing, depending on what one wants, but it is also a cost.

A Minor Literature?

From a literary point of view, one cost is that the minor text – the thing which was Asian American literature – can be overshadowed today. A contemporary challenge in reading and assessing Asian American literature is this tension between the small group of texts and authors with hopes of achieving major status, and the many who have little such hope. The question of what Asian American literary critics or audiences should read cannot, therefore, simply be boiled down to one factor, such as “merit” or “quality,” which are hallmarks of the model minority and its anxieties about being included in the most elite institutions, professions, and neighborhoods (including the gated communities of high literature). It is necessary to pay attention to all the varieties of minor works, which are minor for a number of reasons that range from being “bad” aesthetically to being “bad” deliberately, in their refusal of the kinds of aesthetic features that are rewarded by the mainstream. In short, Asian American literary criticism’s value in the academy is driven higher with the success of Asian American authors that cross to the mainstream, but building a canon purely from the works of these authors would be to concede to mainstream values that are part and parcel of an American culture in which (some) Asian Americans fit in uneasily, if at all (at some times). The chances of building a canon on which all who practice Asian American literary criticism might agree can only succeed if one asks what the purpose of the canon is. Is it to serve the ideological, institutional, or ontological reasons for the existence of Asian American literary criticism? Is the canon a shelf of great books or is it something short enough to pack onto a syllabus? The former allows for greater catholicism of choice; the latter forces hard choices. If there could only be one internment text, for example, would it be John Okada’s historically important *No No Boy*, which never achieved widespread success and whose literariness is a little rough? Or the critically lauded *When the Emperor Was Divine* by Julie Otsuka, whose aesthetic is the beneficiary of several decades of political struggle and social change that afforded its author an education and opportunities that Okada never had?

This either/or choice is undoubtedly too crude, but it gets at the issue of why Asian American literature is worth studying and what impact it can or has made on American literature. The rise of the model minority authorial generation has led to the possibility of some Asian American authors being noteworthy enough to be included in the American canon, and in that way demonstrating the worthiness of Asian American stories, and hence Asian American cultures and peoples, in American culture. But this ascendancy to

representation, as worthwhile as it is, obscures one of Asian American literature's other important functions, which is to bring into question the possibility and usefulness of representation. What would it mean, for example, to have Asian American authors in the American canon if (some, or many) Asian Americans did not have equal access and representation at all levels of American society? The difference between representation, on the one hand, and equity or justice, on the other, is also a crucial issue for Asian American literature and literary criticism. In this sense, Asian American literature of the minor vein – flawed aesthetically, by some dominant criteria, or deliberately resistant to assimilation – also serves a critical purpose. It reminds readers that one of literature's functions is not to seek access to the canon but to show, or to embody, the impossibility and undesirability of access. Asian American literature in the minor vein, and the literary criticism that explores it, thus also has an important contribution to make to American literature by criticizing its terms of possibility. This Asian American literature emerges from writers who refuse the ideological, institutional, and/or ontological demands of professionalized, established Asian American literary criticism. This criticism, in seeking to advocate for Asian American literature, also turns it into a mechanism for, and evidence of, an equality not bestowed on all Asian Americans.

The emergence of Asian American literature as an academic field, in the end, cannot be separated from the emergence of Asian Americans as a partially excluded and partially included minority in all strata of American life, including literature and the academy. In the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century, Asian Americans were mostly excluded from American life and culture, and this exclusion, while pernicious, eventually led to a relatively unified and coherent definition of Asian American literature for both writers and critics. But as Asian Americans have made inroads into more and more institutions of power, and as Asian Americans have become increasingly open to maintaining transpacific connections, coherence and unity can no longer be depended upon. Ironically, the historical moment that sees the establishment of Asian American literature in the academy and the literary marketplace also sees Asian American literature's definition, purpose, and relevance becoming a matter for continued debate and struggle.

Notes

- 1 Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 9.
- 2 David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 395.

- 3 See Min Hyoung Song, *The Children of 1965: On Writing, and Not Writing, as an Asian American* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013) for an account of the transformations in Asian American literature that resulted partially from the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act.
- 4 For an account of this shift from revolution to network, see Glen Omatsu's "The 'Four Prisons' and the Movements of Liberation: Asian American Activism from the 1960s to the 1990s," in *The State of Asian America: Activism and Resistance in the 1990s*, ed. Karen Aguilar-San Juan (Boston: South End Press, 1994), 19–69.
- 5 For a more detailed assessment of the meaning of Vietnam for Asian America, see Viet Thanh Nguyen, "Viet Nam," in *The Routledge Companion to Asian American and Pacific Islander Literature*, ed. Rachel Lee (New York: Routledge, 2014), 365–75.

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and the Impact of Theory

TIMOTHY YU

The ascent of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* into the Asian American literary canon in the early 1990s marks the precise moment when "theory" enters into Asian American studies. In some of the most influential scholarship of that decade – most notably in Lisa Lowe's *Immigrant Acts* – *Dictée* is offered as the primary evidence of a paradigm shift in Asian American literary studies, from a monolithic cultural nationalism grounded in the politics of the 1970s to a more hybrid, deconstructed sense of the Asian American informed by poststructuralist and postcolonial theory. *Dictée* appears as both symptom and cause of a new, theoretically informed Asian American studies, one that questions traditional identity politics and that looks beyond the boundaries of the United States.

As widely accepted as this simple narrative has become, it overlooks much of what continues to be fascinating, and sometimes frustrating, about Cha's *Dictée*. *Dictée*'s apotheosis in the 1990s came a full decade after its publication – a decade in which the book was ignored or even actively rejected by Asian American critics. The reception of *Dictée* shows that critics have often imposed older paradigms of reading on it even as they hail it as a radically transformative work. Finally, *Dictée* continues to elude classification: some elements of the text seem to support an Asian Americanist mode of reading, while others seem to stubbornly resist such reading.

By tracing the critical reception of *Dictée* from the 1990s to the present, this chapter shows how this theoretically informed text came to be a major site for struggles over the role of theory in Asian American studies. As an avant-garde work, *Dictée* appeared to demand new paradigms of reading in order to be understood as an Asian American text, and it became legible to Asian Americanist scholars precisely as they were seeking alternatives to the founding paradigms of their field. *Dictée* has, in turn, become foundational for younger scholars who view its nonnarrative techniques and postcolonial perspectives as central to what Asian American literary studies is now. But

Dictée continues to challenge our new paradigms as well, relentlessly raising questions about the borders of Asian American studies and looking toward the field's continued expansion – or, perhaps, its coming dissolution. While *Dictée* has often been read as exemplary of a move away from identity toward theoretical abstraction, it may be more accurate to view it as a divided text that moves ambivalently between the needs of identity politics and the demands of theoretical critique. Indeed, its logic may ultimately be less linear than circular, moving through theory only to return, ambiguously, to history and identity once again.

The Reception of *Dictée*: In and Against Identity Politics

To use *Dictée* as a marker of the advent of theory in Asian American studies is not, of course, to claim that Asian Americanists had never previously theorized their own field. Early publications and anthologies drew on a range of disciplinary methodologies, from psychology to sociology to history, while also being influenced by the radical politics of the Asian American movement. Early Asian American literary criticism, as displayed in the introduction to *Aiiieeeee!* or in Elaine Kim's *Asian American Literature*, emphasized literature's ability to reveal the social history of Asian Americans. However, it is not until the early 1990s that Asian Americanist scholarship begins to grapple directly with the potential relevance of "Theory" with a capital "T" – in particular, the poststructuralist theory that began to sweep through American literature departments in the 1980s. This theoretical turn is sometimes coupled with an unease about theory's impact on the traditional political and historical foundations of the field.

In her foreword to Shirley Lim and Amy Ling's 1992 collection *Reading the Literatures of Asian America*, Elaine Kim describes an ongoing shift in Asian American studies, from a "cultural nationalism" based on a "unitary identity" to a "cultural pluralism" marked by greater recognition of the "multiplicitous identities and experiences of contemporary Asian Americans." While cultural nationalism was, Kim argues, crucial to the building of an Asian American movement in the 1970s, new realities – from new immigrant communities to greater mobility between the United States and Asia – make a view of Asian American identity as "monolithic and homogenous" no longer tenable.¹

Kim attributes the shift from cultural nationalism to pluralism to social and cultural changes rather than to new academic discourses. However, she concludes her argument with a discussion of a literary text: Cha's *Dictée*. What's

striking about her discussion is that it begins as an admission of *not* liking *Dictée*: “The first time I glanced at *Dictée*, I was put off by the book. I didn’t think that Theresa Cha was talking to me. Instead, it seemed that she was addressing her haunting prose to someone so distant from myself that I could not recognize ‘him.’”² What made *Dictée* off-putting to Kim was its failure to match the paradigms of reading required by cultural nationalism, in which “whatever was interior, personal, emotional, and imaginative was diametrically opposed to whatever was exterior, public, rational, and factual.”³ When she later returned to the book, Kim “came to love the book,” finding it an exemplar of the new pluralism, in which Korean American female identity is portrayed as “multiple and shifting.”⁴ For Kim to appreciate *Dictée*, an entirely new reading paradigm – a new theoretical framework – was necessary. *Dictée* thus becomes a marker of a major paradigm shift in Asian American studies. But how does that shift come to be associated with “theory”?

Dictée is a text deeply informed by theory, but its influences are drawn less from literary theory than from film theory.⁵ During her studies at the University of California, Berkeley, in the 1970s, Cha read extensively in this area, with a particular interest in structuralist and semiotic approaches. In 1980, Cha edited a collection titled *Apparatus – Cinematographic Apparatus*, which included writings by theorists such as Jean-Louis Baudry, Monique Wittig, and Christian Metz. Three essays by Baudry, surveying psychoanalytic, semiotic, deconstructive, and ideological approaches to film, form the core of the book. Drawing on Freud and Lacan, Baudry views film as a scene of subject formation that creates the illusion of a unified self and supports dominant ideologies. In order to challenge such ideologies, Baudry calls attention to the gaps in film’s construction of subjectivity, arguing that attention to “disturbing cinematic elements” can lead to an awareness of the technological – and ideological – apparatus that generates film’s illusion of subjectivity: “[I]t is not by paying attention to the content of images that one is able to account for the impression of reality, but by questioning the apparatus.”⁶

Cha’s commitment to “questioning the apparatus” is apparent throughout *Dictée*. The opening of the “Melpomene/Tragedy” section evokes the experience of watching a film and the illusion it creates: “She could be seen sitting in the first few rows. She would be sitting in the first few rows. Closer the better. The more. Better to eliminate presences of others. . . . The submission is complete. Relinquishes even the vision to immobility. Abandons all protests to that which will appear to the sight.”⁷ The following section, “Erato/Love Poetry,” elaborates the work of the cinematic illusion, while also disturbing it. The opening text of the section blurs the lines between the spectator (“She is

entering now. . . . The doors close behind her. She purchases the ticket, a blue one”) and the onscreen figure (“She enters the screen from the left, before the titles fading in and fading out”).⁸ But this seeming fluidity of film and viewer is broken up visually by gaps between each paragraph on the left-hand page; on the facing page, text is placed opposite those gaps, with phrases that reflect on and reconfigure the left-hand text: “Whiteness of the screen. Takes her backwards.”⁹ This sense of interruption is reinforced by the inclusion of photographs and film stills; the chapter closes with a still of Renée Falconetti as Joan of Arc in Carl Dreyer’s *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc*. The still reminds us that film is not a continuous experience, but a discontinuous one, composed of a series of static images.

But Cha does not limit her critique to the cinematic apparatus. In *Dictée*, as throughout her other work, perhaps the most important “apparatus” is that of language. The scenes of dictation that famously open *Dictée* reveal language learning as a scene of subject making, in which the student reproduces the voices (and presumably the ideologies) of others: “She mimicks the speaking. . . . She allows others. In place of her. Admits others to make full. Make swarm. All barren cavities to make swollen. The others each occupying her. . . . She allows herself caught in their threading, anonymously in their thick motion the weight of their utterance.”¹⁰ Just as she disrupts the cinematic scene, Cha also disrupts the scene of dictation – transcribing or translating too literally or with errors, interrupting one scene with another, rapidly shifting context and voices. For many readers, this constitutes the primary politics of *Dictée*, located not only in its presentation of content, but also in its theoretically informed formal disruptions.

Dictée’s deep interest in theory gives it much in common with other avant-garde works of the same era – but relatively little in common with the kinds of writings being studied by Asian Americanists. The emphasis on literature as social history advanced by the editors of *Aiiiiiii!* in the 1970s and in Elaine Kim’s *Asian American Literature* in the early 1980s offered a critical framework that favored realist narrative – *Aiiiiiii!* includes no poetry. And few of the best-known Asian American works of the 1970s and 1980s display the influence of theory in the way *Dictée* does. Even Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, often regarded as a prototypical work of postmodern writing for its blurring of fiction and autobiography, is not an explicitly self-theorizing work in the way that *Dictée* is – and in any case, critics have often read the work (or critiqued it) through the lens of autobiographical or realist narrative.¹¹ The initial resistance of Kim and other critics to reading *Dictée* as an Asian American work speaks to the relative absence in Asian American studies of

the 1980s of theoretical frameworks that would have made *Dictée's* interventions legible.

How, then, did *Dictée* bring theory into Asian American studies – or at least shift the terms of Asian American studies more strongly toward theory? The most important document of *Dictée's* impact on Asian American studies is the collection *Writing Self, Writing Nation*, issued as a companion volume to the republication of *Dictée* by Berkeley-based Third Woman Press in the mid-1990s. With its origins in a panel held at the 1991 Association for Asian American Studies conference, *Writing Self* includes essays by Elaine Kim, Lisa Lowe, L. Hyun Yi Kang, and Shelley Sunn Wong. Kim's preface emphasizes the need to consider the historical contexts referenced in *Dictée*, from Japanese colonialism in Korea to Korean immigration to the United States, but also the need for reading *Dictée* in a theoretically informed framework "that takes into account historicist, marxist, postcolonial and feminist approaches."¹² Kim's contribution to the collection extends but also struggles with this binary between the historical and the theoretical. She praises *Dictée* for offering a feminist critique of monolithic nationalist narratives, but she also bemoans "post-structuralist critics" who "ignore Cha's Korean heritage, thus denying Korean American identity and gender."¹³ Given the choice between focusing on *Dictée's* theoretical interventions and its revelation of history, Kim chooses to err on the side of the latter:

Dictée has received increasing attention from critics who are attracted to its affinities with postmodern notions of indeterminacy, fragmentation, and free play among shifting multiple identities. Because I am unable to ignore questions of power, I am not so troubled by Korean and Korean American responses to *Dictée* that focus on Cha's Korean references even to the point of ignoring other facets of the text.¹⁴

Even as Kim recognizes and welcomes *Dictée's* theoretical impact on Asian American studies, she also resists a full embrace of this impact, arguably continuing to privilege a framework that values Asian American literature for its contributions to historical narratives of and about Asian Americans.

A fuller acceptance of *Dictée's* theoretical implications can be found in Lisa Lowe's "Unfaithful to the Original: The Subject of *Dictée*," perhaps the most influential of the four essays in the collection. "Unfaithful to the Original" would become the centerpiece of Lowe's paradigm-shifting *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*, a book that extrapolates *Dictée's* insights into a much broader retheorizing of Asian American studies. In "Unfaithful to the Original," Lowe goes much further than Kim does in reading *Dictée* as a

critique of nationalist narratives, arguing that the book “continually thwarts the reader’s desire to abstract a notion of ethnic or national identity.”¹⁵ *Dictée*’s “critique of identity,” Lowe argues, shows that any “concept of unified nationalist membership” risks reproducing colonial and imperial logics.¹⁶ Although such an insight stands, in Kim’s account, somewhat in opposition to the traditional foundations of Asian American studies in cultural nationalism, the idea that “Nationalism may be continuous with colonialism” (50) is, of course, a key insight of postcolonial theory, with Lowe citing Frantz Fanon and Homi Bhabha in support of her argument.¹⁷ Postcolonial theory also gives Lowe the language of “hybridity,” as she describes the voice of *Dictée* as a “hybrid, nuanced, ‘unfaithful’ voice.”¹⁸

In Lowe’s reading, it would seem that *Dictée* does *not* draw its significance from the sources Kim identifies – its contribution to historical narratives about Koreans and Korean Americans. What, then, is the nature of its political intervention? As we have seen, Cha saw her method of “questioning the apparatus” as an ideological intervention, and Lowe follows suit; where Cha draws on film theory, Lowe turns to Marxist theory, comparing Cha’s depiction of subject formation through language and film to Louis Althusser’s concept of interpellation. *Dictée*, in Lowe’s reading, explores multiple sites of interpellation – nation, religion, language, gender – and reveals that “one site of interpellation may provide the means or instruments with which to disrupt another apparatus.”¹⁹ The claim for *Dictée*’s significance is grounded not in its development of a narrative of Asian American identity, but in its engagement of a concept grounded in Marxist theory, which *Dictée* is able to make “more specific” and “more precise” through its evocation of the Korean and Korean American context.²⁰ Lowe’s reading, then, seeks to participate in a theoretical conversation that goes well beyond the previous disciplinary boundaries of Asian American studies.

The conclusion of Lowe’s essay makes plain the challenge that her reading of *Dictée*, and its deploying of theory, offers to Asian American studies. Lowe agrees with Kim’s assessment that identity politics, grounded in narratives of “identification with a common ‘origin’ or common position in relation to domination ... have been essential,” and that “notions of identity have provided important models of social and political unity necessary for coherent liberation struggles.”²¹ But the time has come, Lowe asserts, to acknowledge the equally pressing claims of “a politics of difference” that emphasizes the “multiplicity of subject formations” and acknowledges the cross-cutting effects of race, gender, class, and sexuality.²² Lowe’s reading of *Dictée* emphasizes that politics of difference, and what Lowe draws from theory, from Fanon

to Althusser, is also largely a concern with hybridity, multiplicity, and difference. Even though Lowe closes by calling for a “dialectic between the politics of identity and the politics of difference,”²³ it’s not much of an exaggeration to say that theory is employed in her essay as an antagonist of Asian American studies, at least as Asian American studies has been practiced up to that point.

The question, then, is whether Asian American studies can survive and even prosper from its encounter with theory, or whether the politics of difference that theory seems to bring with it will overwhelm the politics of identity, possibly leading to a dissolution of the field. Such concerns are foreshadowed in “Unnaming the Same: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée*,” Shelley Sunn Wong’s contribution to *Writing Self*. While Lowe relies primarily on the insights of postcolonial and Marxist theory to frame *Dictée*’s accomplishments, Wong approaches *Dictée* primarily as a poetic text, linking its formal experimentation to contemporary poetry’s critique of the “lyric ‘I’” and to poststructuralist theory.²⁴ Wong acknowledges the highly disruptive effect such interventions may have on the traditional foundations of Asian American studies. *Dictée*, Wong writes, “disturbed the model of racial identity promulgated by an Asian American nationalism.”²⁵ She links *Dictée*’s emergence to a historical moment in the 1980s when “Asian American identity politics and the nationalist form it took began to founder” in a “welter of difference.”²⁶ It is precisely at this moment that *Dictée* becomes legible to Asian American critics: “It is within this moment of tension . . . when the politics of identity confronts a politics of difference that a space can be found in which to read *Dictée*.”²⁷

While Lowe concludes her argument with this balance between identity and difference, Wong presses the argument further, warning that the post-structuralist emphasis on difference has the potential to push Asian American concerns out of the picture entirely. “[P]oststructuralism’s skepticism about the availability of the referent,” Wong observes, can be “exaggerated to the point that the real often disappears from consideration.”²⁸ Under poststructuralism, the specificity of Asian American experience risks “absorption” in or “appropriation” by a generalized theory of difference.²⁹ Wong singles out for criticism readings of *Dictée* by Stephen-Paul Martin and Priscilla Wald, which in Wong’s view fail to attend to “the specific and material historical conditions” of Cha’s writing and risk “colonizing difference itself and rendering alterity for alterity’s sake.”³⁰ *Dictée*, it seems, is at risk of being appropriated as a generalized illustration of “theory,” at the cost of any awareness of its status as an Asian American text.

The critical divide evident in *Writing Self* – between valuing *Dictée* for its revelation of history and celebrating it for its refusal of reference – is, arguably,

a divide present within *Dictée*. As I have observed elsewhere,³¹ critical attention to *Dictée* has primarily focused on the text's first half, particularly the "Clio/History" and "Calliope/Epic Poetry" sections, which most explicitly reference the colonization of Korea. It's no accident that these are the sections that lend themselves most easily to narrative, realist, and biographical readings. "Clio/History" begins with the birth and death dates of Korean nationalist hero Yu Guan Soon, and the chapter can easily be read as the story of Yu's life; Cha even provides a narrative synopsis of the actions that would make her a hero and martyr: "In Guan Soon's 16th year, 1919, the conspiracy by the Japanese to overthrow the Korean Government is achieved. . . . In the aftermath of this incident, Guan Soon forms a resistant group with fellow students and actively begins her revolutionary work."³² The juxtaposition of these accounts with historical documents testifying to Japanese violence and oppression reinforce the reading of the chapter as a revisionary history. Elaine Kim, for instance, argues that this chapter "reclaims Yu's story from official Korean History . . . by emphasizing . . . Yu's agency."³³

In what sense, though, does "Clio/History" actually tell Yu Guan Soon's "story"? While the brief account of Yu's actions and the corresponding historical documents offer fragments of a historical narrative, the bulk of the chapter consists of passages like these: "She makes complete her duration. As others have made complete theirs: rendered incessant, obsessive myth, rendered immortal their acts without the leisure to examine whether the parts false the parts real according to History's revision."³⁴ The chapter, in fact, seems far more interested in deconstructing Yu's story than in offering any kind of alternative narrative. Cha's aim is "to find the reply that will not repeat history in oblivion"³⁵ – in short, not simply to tell a different history but to *interrupt* the telling.

This turn away from offering historical narratives – or even historical content – becomes even more pronounced in the book's later sections. Beginning with "Erato/Love Poetry," Cha shifts her focus to more abstract scenes, from the viewing of a film to exchanges of phone calls or letters. In these later chapters, the subject of Korea and its colonization gives way to a focus on the "apparatus" of ideological interpellation. Cha's engagement with film theory makes it natural that the projection of film onto a screen is the prototype of interpellation; her hope is not to project a different set of images onto the screen (to tell a different story), but to reimagine the screen as something else entirely. "What of the partition," Cha asks in "Elitere/Lyric Poetry" – could the screen be seen as a kind of barrier behind which something else might lie? "If words are to be uttered, they would be from

behind the partition. . . . If words are to be sounded, impress through the partition.”³⁶ These later chapters are the most explicitly “theoretical” of the text, because they largely eschew historical content or narrative in favor of stagings of allegories for the workings of ideology; for the most part, they are not obviously “about” Korea or Asian Americans at all. The relative lack of attention to these chapters by Asian Americanist scholars suggests a continuing reliance on historical content and context to determine the proper subject of Asian American studies, and foregrounds the possible tension between those contexts and the concerns of theory.

The readings of *Dictée* advanced in *Writing Self, Writing Nation* thus bring Asian American studies into direct contact with “theory,” but they also inaugurate a debate about theory’s role in Asian American studies that continues into the present. In these readings, the impact of theory, both in *Dictée* and in its interpretation, is primarily deconstructive, challenging the narratives of identity, unity, and nationalism that have formed the traditional basis for Asian American studies. While critics such as Wong and Lowe present this deconstructive move as historically necessary and politically vital, their readings also raise the question of the boundaries of Asian American studies. If a text such as *Dictée* can be best understood as an illustration of broader theories that are not specific to Asian American studies or to Asian American historical experiences, what, if anything, still compels us to read it as an Asian American text from within Asian American studies? Both Lowe and Wong insist on the continuing importance of reading *Dictée* as an Asian American text, but they do so primarily by pointing to historical contexts and narratives that *Dictée* pointedly subverts or obscures.³⁷ If Asian American studies has an essentialism at its core, embodied in such historical narratives, then what happens to the field when that essentialism is deconstructed?

While such questions did not lead Asian American studies into the “theory wars” that gripped literature departments in the 1980s and 1990s, a few critics did sound concerns about the field’s increasingly theoretical tilt. Perhaps the best known of these polemics is Sau-ling Wong’s “Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads.” First published in 1995, Wong’s essay describes the shifting landscape of Asian American studies in terms similar to Kim, Lowe, and Shelley Sunn Wong, seeing an “easing of cultural nationalist concerns,” a “complication of identity politics,” and an increasing emphasis on transnational and diasporic perspectives.³⁸ Considered together, these developments are “disrupting the apparently consensual theoretical basis of the Asian American movement.”³⁹ But Wong warns against any sense that these theoretical shifts represent “a more

advanced and theoretically more sophisticated ... stage in Asian American studies.”⁴⁰ She identifies two major risks in Asian American studies’ embrace of theory: “unwitting subsumption into master narratives (despite a mandate to subvert master narratives built into the ethnic studies approach), and depoliticization occluded by theoretical self-critique” (135).⁴¹ Wong argues that some of the key political achievements of Asian American cultural nationalism – its emphasis on “claiming America” and its construction of a pan-ethnic, racialized coalition – may well be lost in a shift to new theoretical paradigms that reject nationalist and unitary narratives. And in a final nod to *Dictée*’s central role in these debates, Wong concludes her essay with a pointed critique of Elaine Kim’s reading of *Dictée*:

Elaine Kim states that this radically destabilizing text demonstrates how “we can ‘have it all’ by claiming an infinity of layers of self and community”... I believe we can “have it all” only in our consciousness; the infinity of layers of self and community inevitably shrinks when one attempts to translate the claim into material reality... [W]hatever claiming one does must be enacted from a political location – one referenced to a political structure, a nation.⁴²

While Kim, Lowe, and Shelley Sunn Wong propose (with varying degrees of confidence) that a balance can be struck between the politics of identity and those of difference, Sau-ling Wong suggests that their readings of texts like *Dictée* – and their corresponding embrace of theory – may, in fact, be damaging to the political groundwork of Asian American studies. Indeed, Wong seems to view the rush away from cultural nationalism and toward theory as an existential threat to Asian America, worrying that “the loosely held and fluctuating collectivity called ‘Asian Americans’ will dissolve back into its descent defined constituents as soon as one leaves American national borders behind.”⁴³ While Wong is clearly arguing for the continuing relevance of cultural nationalism, she may in some ways be truer to the divided nature of *Dictée* than the readings collected in *Writing Self, Writing Nation*. The latter tends to elide the gap between the traditional ground of the field and *Dictée*’s new theoretical interventions; Wong, instead, suggests that *Dictée* presents us with a difficult choice – between identity and theory – and that we must confront the full implications of that choice. For Wong, a full embrace of *Dictée*’s theoretical implications may mean leaving Asian America behind entirely – a step she cautions Asian Americanists against taking.

Wong’s position has not been adopted by most Asian Americanists, who have, in the past two decades, largely embraced – at least superficially – the tilt toward theory. Susan Koshy’s 1996 article “The Fiction of Asian American

Literature” offers a blistering critique of Wong’s “Denationalization,” charging Wong with presenting a “simplistic” version of Asian American studies that is “conservative” in its politics.⁴⁴ Instead, Koshy argues that Asian American studies must be *more* aggressive in its embrace of theory, asserting that “the field has been weak in theoretical work” and that this “lack of significant theoretical work has affected its development and its capacity to address the stratifications and differences that constitute its distinctiveness within ethnic studies.”⁴⁵ We can detect a shift in Koshy’s emphasis, one that goes beyond the sometimes ambivalent embrace of theory signaled in *Writing Self, Writing Nation*, and that we can perhaps characterize as part of a generational shift from the founding figures of Asian American studies to their younger successors. While the contributions in that book are generally characterized by what Wong characterizes as the logic of “having it all” – the idea that cultural nationalism and new theoretical models are not incompatible, but can be complementary – Koshy seems more inclined to jettison the legacy of cultural nationalism entirely. For Koshy, the apparent tension between identity and difference collapses when we reject “the assumption that there is a ‘real’ Asian American identity to which our vocabulary and procedures can be adequately.”⁴⁶ Borrowing from Gayatri Spivak, Koshy posits the Asian American as a “catachrestic” term, one without a fixed referent that, paradoxically, “we cannot not use.”⁴⁷ There is little evidence in Koshy’s account of the anxiety about eroding the foundations of Asian American studies evident in Sau-ling Wong and, to varying degrees, in *Writing Self, Writing Nation*.

The deconstruction of the Asian American initiated by scholars such as Lowe and Koshy is developed to its fullest extent in Kandice Chuh’s 2003 *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique*, a text that offers a thoroughgoing consideration of the role of theory in Asian American studies. Chuh’s definition of the Asian American rejects the “real-world” grounding central to cultural nationalism, relying “not on the empirical presence of Asian-raced bodies in the United States” but on “the fantasy links between body and subjectivity discursively forged within the literary and legal texts considered here.”⁴⁸ Chuh’s project is explicitly poststructuralist, framing the Asian American as a term that “deconstructs itself, is itself deconstruction.”⁴⁹ Chuh proposes redefining Asian American studies as a “subjectless discourse,” one in which we resist seeking to “actualize” the Asian American by “enumerating various components of differences,” in favor of analyzing “the various configurations of power and knowledge through which the term comes to have meaning.”⁵⁰ Chuh’s relentless deconstruction leads her to assert that terms like “race” and “Asian American” are “meaningless,”⁵¹ and that their very emptiness should

form the basis for work in Asian American studies. Indeed, we could see *Imagine Otherwise* as arguing for an Asian American studies *founded on* post-structuralist theory – what Chuh calls a “strategic *anti*-essentialism,”⁵² a foundational antifoundationalism. Such a framework seems antithetical to any argument for Asian American distinctiveness, as Chuh calls for a model based in “‘complex personhood’ rather than multicultural otherness”⁵³ and takes as her focus not race but a more abstract notion of “justice.”⁵⁴ The fact that Chuh must clarify at one point that she is “not arguing for the dissolution of Asian American studies” reveals how radically such a theory-based vision of the field challenges the field’s historical origins.⁵⁵

Although Chuh does not discuss *Dictée* directly, it is easy to see how Cha’s text might provide a model for a “subjectless discourse” of the kind she describes, particularly in its later sections. While “Clio/History” has at least a nominal biographical subject in Yu Guan Soon, and “Calliope/Epic Poetry” addresses the figure of Cha’s mother (albeit in the second person), sections such as “Elitere/Lyric Poetry” and “Terpsichore/Choral Dance” lack an easily identifiable subject. In contrast to other sections, neither of these latter chapters has a “she” or an “I” that we could regard as a coherent character. This matters because, as Chuh’s theoretical critique suggests, Asian American literary studies has traditionally relied upon the critic’s ability to identify a biographical subject who can be identified as Asian American (whether through identification with the author or through historical context) and whose story can be linked to those of other Asian Americans. In the absence of such a subject, it is much less clear how we identify a text as Asian American at all, to say nothing of how we develop a critical practice around it that we could call Asian American studies.

But if *Dictée* is a divided text that in some ways pits identity against theory, it is also a circular text – “a circle within a circle, a series of concentric circles,” as Cha puts it near the text’s conclusion⁵⁶ – that frames its theoretical explorations with more biographically and culturally marked content. After the abstraction of the late sections, the final chapter, “Polymnia/Sacred Poetry,” returns – if elusively – to the subject matter of Korea. As several critics have noted, “Polymnia/Sacred Poetry” presents a version of the Korean myth of Princess Pali, who travels to the well of the Western sky and serves for nine years to obtain healing water for her mother. But this invocation of myth is not as strongly historically marked as the material of the earlier chapters; Princess Pali is not named, but alluded to as “she,” blurring the mythical character both with the named women of the early sections and the more abstract “she” who animates the later, theory-driven

sections. Indeed, this evocation of myth is also a self-referential moment, as the description of the “she” closely matches the costume Cha sometimes wore during her own performance art:⁵⁷

She too was wearing a white kerchief around her thick black hair braided in a single knot down to her back, which swung forward when she leaned against the well. She wore an apron over the skirt which she had gathered and tied to keep it from the water.⁵⁸

By circling back to Korea, Cha suggests that the movement from identity to theory is not a unidirectional one, in which identity and history are abandoned as we move toward theoretical abstraction. Instead, we find ourselves returning to the scene of identity – and of history, culture, and nation – but with a difference. Having moved through deconstructive critique, we can no longer look to historical narratives (or counternarratives) for an opposition to or escape from ideology. Art becomes the crucial context within which issues of theory and identity can be played out, where acts can be both referential and performative, both abstract and concrete. While Asian Americanist critics often turn to art and literature to explore Asian American issues, they have rarely theorized why or how art and literature create fertile ground for defining Asian America. Cha’s self-theorizing work shows how art and literature provide a terrain on which “Asian America” is continually unfolding, shaped by history and culture but always in a process of self-definition. Even the seemingly “subjectless” discourse of *Dictée* retains points of contact with the past, echoing or restaging forms of identity as a way of moving beyond their limits.

Asian American Studies after *Dictée*: Recent Readings

It’s not too much of a stretch to describe Chuh’s landscape of Asian American studies as a post-*Dictée* landscape, one in which the traditional foundations of the field have been subverted or even jettisoned altogether. *Dictée* has gone from being a text rejected by Asian American critics to one that occupies the center of our literary canon; a search of the *MLA International Bibliography* turns up seventy-three articles on *Dictée*, seventy of which have appeared since the publication of *Writing Self* in 1994. But how significantly has the infusion of theory into Asian American studies marked by *Dictée*’s ascent changed the field? Perhaps we can approach this question by glancing at the ongoing reception of *Dictée* since the mid-1990s. Have our reading models adapted to

Dictée, or has the dialectic between identity and difference continued to haunt the text?

It has certainly been the case that *Dictée*'s formal experiments have made it a point of interest for critics who do not primarily read it through an Asian Americanist lens. Juliana Spahr's influential reading of *Dictée* as a postmodern text, which first appeared in her 1996 article "Postmodernism, Reader, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's 'Dictée,'" is primarily focused on the text's colonial and postcolonial elements, its multilingualism, and its use of formal techniques of collage and fragmentation. Although Spahr makes occasional reference to other Asian American authors, her primary point is to argue that "there is no separate, essential, immigrant tradition" and that *Dictée* "demonstrates how women and minorities have more options" in exploring alternative histories.⁵⁹ Other scholars have read *Dictée* primarily through theories of autobiography or of narrative theory. For instance, Nicole McDaniel's "'The Remnant Is the Whole': Collage, Serial Self-Representation, and Recovering Fragments in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*," while citing many of the Asian Americanist critics who have written on the text, is primarily interested in the way Cha uses collage to disrupt the autobiographical form. But even critics who do operate from within a more explicitly Asian Americanist framework tend to treat *Dictée* in relative isolation. Its radical difference from the majority of the other works that make up the Asian American literary tradition continues to make it appear *sui generis* and more commonly approached through external theoretical frameworks rather than placed within a tradition of other Asian American works.⁶⁰

Within Asian American studies *Dictée* has become a literary touchstone, but it is still an open question as to how significantly it has transformed reading practices. As *Writing Self, Writing Nation* shows, the embrace of *Dictée*'s radical difference is often paired with a desire to assimilate it to more conventionally Asian Americanist paradigms, generally through emphasizing its unity and its reference to historical realities. Sue J. Kim observes that "despite critics' theoretical orientation towards heterogeneity and the impossibility of final articulation, readers of *Dictée* nearly unanimously speak of a narrator and/or acting subject, and moreover, identify that narrator as Cha."⁶¹ In this sense, the identity/difference dialectic continues to haunt Asian American studies' readings of *Dictée*. Despite the theoretical arguments of Lowe, Koshy, Chuh, and others in *Dictée*'s wake, identity politics continues to offer a residual framework by which we make Asian American texts intelligible.⁶²

Some of the most interesting recent readings of *Dictée* locate a resistance to theoretical abstraction within the text, but offer new terms for this resistance.

Despite Chuh's rejection of the "empirical presence of Asian-raced bodies" as the basis for Asian American studies, many critics have focused on Cha's invocation of the body as a material trace within the text. Hyo K. Kim argues that *Dictée's* interest in physicality and the "embodied self" challenges the difference/identity binary by "embodying the relation between language, culture, and self."⁶³ Joseph Jonghyun Jeon reframes the seeming abstraction of *Dictée* as an interest in *things*, allowing Cha to "present in physical form the abstract terms through which bodies have been historically understood in racial terms."⁶⁴ Such readings suggest that theoretical abstraction might turn us back toward the material and physical rather than away from it. In this view, *Dictée* presents not a victory of theory over identity but a kind of inversion of the terms. It is through theoretical and linguistic abstraction that one gets to the racialized Asian body, rather than beginning from the empirical reality of bodies and moving toward theory. It remains to be seen whether such readings can provide a reframing of Asian American studies that neither jettisons the field's historical foundations nor covertly relies upon those foundations to provide an unexamined coherence.

Dictée and the Paradox of Asian American Studies

Twenty years after it was first taken up by Asian American critics, *Dictée* continues to present a paradox at the heart of our canon. It appears as both cause and symptom of a turn toward "theory" in Asian American studies – a turn that has so profoundly challenged the identity politics and the nationalist narratives that underpin the field that the very existence of the discipline seems called into question. Yet its insistence on history, on the body, on the physicality of writing reveals, in its readers, the persistence of narratives of identity in Asian American studies – or, perhaps, the emergence of new paradigms that can continue to ground a newly theoretical Asian American studies in history and politics. *Dictée* remains a divided, ambivalent text, one that critiques the repetitive structures of historical narrative while insisting on the material presence of history in archives, images, and the body. It is an embodiment of a discipline at a crossroads: Has the advent of theory brought the end of Asian American studies as we know it? Can Asian American studies retain its coherence while also attending to the utopian vision articulated in *Dictée's* closing lines? As Cha offers a moment of pure transparency, free of ideological mediation – "There is no one inside the pane and the glass between" – she wonders, as do we, what that future beyond might look like: "Trees adhere to silence in attendance to the view to come."⁶⁵

Notes

- 1 Elaine H. Kim, "Foreword," in *Reading the Literatures of Asian America*, ed. Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Amy Ling (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), xi–xiv.
- 2 *Ibid.*, xv.
- 3 *Ibid.*, xvi.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 I discuss the context and critical reception of *Dictée* in greater detail in chapter 4 of Timothy Yu, *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry since 1965* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).
- 6 Jean-Louis Baudry, "The Apparatus," in *Apparatus – Cinematographic Apparatus*, ed. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (New York: Tanam, 1980), 61.
- 7 Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictée* (Berkeley, CA: Third Woman, 1995), 79.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 94.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 95.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 3–4.
- 11 The so-called Chin-Kingston debate, in which Frank Chin accused Kingston of providing a "fake" version of Chinese history and culture, can be seen in part as a debate over whether Asian American writing needed to offer a realistic version of social history. For an overview of the debate, see King-Kok Cheung, "The Woman Warrior versus the Chinaman Pacific: Must a Chinese American Critic Choose between Feminism and Heroism?," in *Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior: A Casebook*, ed. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 113–33.
- 12 Elaine H. Kim, preface to *Writing Self, Writing Nation: A Collection of Essays on Dictée by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha*, ed. Elaine H. Kim and Norma Alarcón (Berkeley, CA: Third Woman, 1994), x.
- 13 Elaine H. Kim, "Poised on the In-between: A Korean American's Reflections on Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*," in *Writing Self, Writing Nation: A Collection of Essays on Dictée by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha*, ed. Elaine H. Kim and Norma Alarcón (Berkeley, CA: Third Woman, 1994), 22.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 21.
- 15 Lisa Lowe, "Unfaithful to the Original: The Subject of *Dictée*," in *Writing Self, Writing Nation: A Collection of Essays on Dictée by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha*, ed. Elaine H. Kim and Norma Alarcón (Berkeley, CA: Third Woman, 1994), 36.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 38.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 50.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 47.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 56.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 54.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 62–3.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 63. Lowe provides several examples of this "politics of difference": "[A]mong feminists, greater attention is being given to the concerns of women of color; within movements organized around race or ethnicity, the acknowledgment of differences of gender, class, and sexuality has not weakened those movements, but has opened up new lines of affiliation with other groups ... and among nationalist movements,

feminists have argued for reproductive rights, called attention to the gendered division of labor, and criticized religious fundamentalism as oppressive to women.”

- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Shelley Sunn Wong, “Unnaming the Same: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée*,” in *Writing Self, Writing Nation: A Collection of Essays on Dictée by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha*, ed. Elaine H. Kim and Norma Alarcón (Berkeley, CA: Third Woman, 1994), 117.
- 25 Ibid., 130.
- 26 Ibid., 132. Wong’s concept of “difference” is not precisely the same as Lowe’s. She argues that the “advent of the new social movements of the 1980s” – including the gay and disability rights movements, as well as peace and ecological movements – brought a “dispersal of political allegiances which called into question the effectiveness of an oppositional strategy founded on the basis of racial identification alone.” But she also uses “difference” in a sense more directly linked to the literary theory of deconstruction, citing “a poststructuralist politics of difference” based in “a critical practice which values difference, indeterminacy and negation.”
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Ibid., 134.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Ibid., 135.
- 31 Yu, *Race and the Avant-Garde*. See chapter 4 for my discussion of Cha.
- 32 Cha, *Dictée*, 30.
- 33 Kim, “Poised on the In-between,” 16.
- 34 Cha, *Dictée*, 28.
- 35 Ibid., 33.
- 36 Ibid., 132.
- 37 E.g., despite her insistence that *Dictée* challenges traditional historical narratives, Lowe’s reading of *Dictée* rests in part on a two-page narrative that Lowe provides of “the recent history of Korea” from the early twentieth century to the present. Lowe, “Unfaithful to the Original,” 44–5.
- 38 Sau-ling C. Wong, “Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads,” in *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity, and Literature*, ed. Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 126–7.
- 39 Ibid., 129.
- 40 Ibid., 135.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Ibid., 139–40.
- 43 Ibid., 138.
- 44 Susan Koshy, “The Fiction of Asian American Literature,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 9.2 (1996): 340–1.
- 45 Ibid., 316.
- 46 Ibid., 342.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), x.
- 49 Ibid., 8.

- 50 Ibid., 9–11.
- 51 E.g., Chuh writes of the “prediscursive meaninglessness of identificatory terms like ‘Asian American’” and observes that “in and of itself, race, no matter which ‘race,’ has no meaning – it is situationally determined but fundamentally undecidable.” Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise*, 86, 70.
- 52 Ibid., 10.
- 53 Ibid., 29.
- 54 Ibid., 8.
- 55 Ibid., 111.
- 56 Cha, *Dictée*, 175.
- 57 See, e.g., the costume Cha wears in the performance *A Ble Wail*, an image from which can be found on the website for the forthcoming film *The Dream of the Audience* (<http://theresahakkyungcha.com/film/>).
- 58 Cha, *Dictée*, 167.
- 59 Juliana Spahr, “Postmodernism, Readers, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s ‘Dictée,’” *College Literature* 23.3 (1996): 39.
- 60 See, e.g., Sue J. Kim’s reading of *Dictée* through the lens of narrative theory.
- 61 Sue J. Kim, “Narrator, Author, Reader: Equivocation in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée*,” *Narrative* 16.2 (2008): 163.
- 62 For a recent discussion of the ongoing legacy of identity politics in Asian American studies, see Christopher Lee, *The Semblance of Identity: Aesthetic Mediation in Asian American Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).
- 63 Hyo K. Kim, “Embodying the In-Between: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée*,” *Mosaic* 46.4 (2013): 128.
- 64 Joseph Jonghyun Jeon, *Racial Things, Racial Forms: Objecthood in Avant-Garde Asian American Poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), 19.
- 65 Cha, *Dictée*, 179.

Heterogeneity to Multiplicity: Building Asian American Literary Critique

ANITA MANNUR
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Expanding the framing possibilities for Asian American cultural production and analysis, Lisa Lowe's pivotal *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (1996) quickly became a standard in the field and continued to wield tremendous critical purchase as subsequent generations of critical scholarship and creative writing emerged. Central to *Immigrant Acts* is the chapter "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Asian American Differences." The essay was first published in the inaugural issue of *Diaspora: A Journal of Diaspora Studies* and has since become one of Asian American literary studies' most frequently anthologized essays, appearing in several notable collections within Asian American literary surveys and critical theory surveys.¹ Why does it appear to be one of the most cited articles within Asian American literary studies and immigrant literary studies writ large?² How have the boundaries of the terrain of what is called Asian American literature opened since the essay was published? In this chapter, we explore why Lowe's essay, and its related focus on clearing a space for diaspora and transnationalism (as well as categories of class, gender, sexuality, and language), was so instrumental in creating a paradigmatic shift in the ways in which literary scholars approached questions of inclusions and exclusion within Asian American studies. In particular, we explore why this now canonical essay struck such a responsive chord among Asian Americanist scholars and writers, particularly among those who had long felt marginalized within the field and those whose subjects of studies and stories did not "properly" fit within narratives of what Asian American literature might constitute. In addressing this question we unpack the critical possibilities within the conceptual frameworks of "heterogeneity, hybridity and multiplicity" while attending to the particularities of how certain literary forms and genres benefitted from the critical lens opened up by Lowe's critique. In implicitly arguing that this body of literature complicates the claim to the United States that was one of the principal goals of the Asian American movement, we argue that heeding heterogeneity, hybridity,

and multiplicity deepens our understanding of Asian American and American literature, thereby enlarging the literary consciousness of American readers.³

Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity

Lowe's essay begins with concerns that had animated several literary Asian American anthologies in terms of questioning the meaning of the term *Asian American*. She notes, "[F]rom the perspective of the majority culture, Asian Americans may very well be constructed as different from, and other than, Euro-Americans. But from the perspectives of Asian Americans, we are perhaps even more different, more diverse, among ourselves: being men and women at different distances and generations from our 'original' Asian cultures."⁴ Underlying this seemingly simple articulation lurks a more deceptive complexity involving the political necessity of "building" Asian American culture in the mid-1990s and what Lowe signals as the "risks of a cultural politics that relies upon the construction of sameness and the exclusion of differences."⁵ Indeed, to understand and unpack the complexity of Asian American difference would become a vital first step in reorienting thinking about Asian American subjects, and by extension Asian American literary and cultural production and politics.

A distinguishing factor in Lowe's work is that it offers a conceptual vocabulary to think through the multiple differences that structured Asian American cultural, social, and political formation. Earlier foundational efforts to conceptualize Asian American formation had valued the importance of difference, but more often than not these conceptual frameworks had been structured around ethnic grouping or affiliations vis-à-vis a particularly sedimented notion of what it means to be "American."⁶ More often than not, Lowe claims, this notion leads to thematic readings of Asian American writing limited to generational and familial conflict between "Asian" traditions and "American modernity and assimilation." For Lowe, neither "Asian" nor "American" is closed, stable, and discrete. Using Antonio Gramsci's understanding of hegemony, Lowe's article sought to disrupt the seemingly stable hierarchic relationship between "dominant" and "minority" positions by understanding the terms as continually in mutual but unequal contestation and flux.⁷

But even as the privileging of U.S. centrism and a rootedness in the American nation-state was cast aside in later attempts to define Asian American differences – attempts that also accommodated feminist and newer immigrant perspectives – few attempts were made to transform the nation-centered logic through which Asian American subject formation itself was defined.

A case in point is the immensely valuable but somewhat taxonomic study of Asian American literature, King-Kok Cheung's *Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*. Though ostensibly inspired by Lowe's concept of heterogeneity, particularly in terms of Lowe's rejection of a "unifying Asian American sensibility," Cheung's work invests in the notion that the "national" remains the space from which to begin articulating difference.⁸ Categories like Chinese American or Japanese American remain immutable such that one can thematically identify a set of texts by authors' ethnic origins as Korean or Indian or Vietnamese. In this context, ethnicity and national origins remain more salient as descriptive categories from which to fashion literary analysis than the category of race.

For Lowe, by contrast, the project of defining Asian American difference hinges less on individual ethnicities that assemble Asian Americanness. Instead, her work emphasizes the process through which subjects become and inhabit this position of difference to reveal the operations of American history and culture. To this end, the language of difference becomes vitally important in underscoring how to orient oneself epistemologically toward the Asian American subject as a state formation. As Lowe notes, the terms *hybridity*, *heterogeneity*, and *multiplicity* are necessary "in the characterization of Asian American culture," not because they serve to describe identities in rhetorical or literary terms. Rather, their importance derives from the attempt to name "the material contradictions that characterize Asian American groups."⁹ For Lowe, these terms strategically function as more than descriptors of the forms of vibrant diversity that work in the service of multicultural difference. For the terms to retain political and social efficacy, they must remain rooted to the very conditions of inequality, injustice, and inequity from which they emerge and wish to name.

Heterogeneity, then, is not merely a term that positions itself in opposition to homogeneity. Heterogeneity recognizes the differential power relations within and among Asian Americans, particularly in relation to law and class. It articulates and names the differences between and among undocumented immigrants, HiB high-tech workers, fourth-generation Nisei Japanese Americans, and "boat people." In Lowe's words, it "destabilizes the dominant discursive construction and determination of Asian Americans" as a homogenous entity or having a singular experience with American culture and the U.S. nation-state.¹⁰ Given subjects that are defined against or outside the U.S. nation-state, the works of South Asian American authors such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, Rakesh Satyal, and Arab American works including Mohja Kahf's *Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* and Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*

expand the coalitional possibility of Asian American literary studies. Each of these literary works explores complicated relations within the subcategories of Asian America.

In Lowe's essay, the term *hybridity* recognizes the fundamental flawed logic that would essentialize differences between such diverse groupings as those described previously as an indistinguishable mass. Where heterogeneity identifies the unevenness of material conditions emanating from class and immigrant status, hybridity speaks to the kinds of difference that derive from the intermingling of race and language. In this context, hybridity is explicitly tied to the colonial contexts of Asian American subject formation and names the differential mixings that accrued as a result of colonial violence, imperialism, war, and genocide. "The racial and linguistic mixings in the Philippines and among Filipinos in the United States," Lowe notes as an example, are among those material traces left by Spanish colonialism, U.S. imperialism, and war.¹¹ Novels like Jessica Hagedorn's *Dogeaters*, which Lowe examines, and a plethora of other novels follow other imperial trajectories that speak to histories of mixings and comminglings. Chang Rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*, Jhumpa Lahiri's *Lowland*, Karen Tei Yamashita's *Brazil Maru*, for example, are works that very much follow the trail of multiple forms of imperial histories that intersect in the contemporary conditions of the Asian American subject.

Hybridity also takes different form if we understand not only racial and cultural mixing as a type of racialization but also proximity to other raced and gendered bodies, as in the case of Brian Ascalon Roley's *American Son*. This is a novel that is consummately about the perils of not being able or willing to lay claim to Asian Americanness, thus leading the Filipino-white *mestizo* protagonist to non-Anglo and American typologies of (non)assimilation. In a feat of ethnic, gender, and class performance, the narrator's brother Tomas dons a Virgin of Guadalupe tattoo and passes as a Mexican gang member to sell his attack dogs, which he claims to be pure-breds, to rich customers. Tomas later grooms his brother Gabe to be as capable of committing violent acts as he is. Thus, recalling Lowe's reading of Diana Chang's short story "The Oriental Contingent," about two Chinese American girls (one born in China and another adopted by a white family), we envision ethnicity not as a question only of simple lineage but as "imagined, practiced, continued—worked out as much between ourselves and our communities as it is transmitted from one generation to another."¹²

Adoption too becomes another source of subject-formation as in Aimee Phan's collection of short stories *We Should Never Meet*. The linked stories in this collection recall the historic Operation Babylift during which thousands

of orphans were evacuated from Vietnam to the United States in the weeks preceding the Fall of Saigon in 1975. Through the series of linked stories, Phan weaves a apparently seamless transnational link between locations in a war-torn homeland in Vietnam and an adoptive homeland in Orange County's "Little Saigon." Heterogeneous in location and transnational in scope, Phan's work published in the early 2000s is one that speaks to a hybrid form of citizenship and forced belonging that would characterize the vexed experience of the transnational refugee adoptee. In cleaving a new space for this form of literary subjectivity, the nation-state comes under a kind of erasure and is resignified along the lines David Palumbo-Liu suggests in his work *Asian/America: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* that maintaining a shifting relationality using the figure of the slash becomes a way to insist upon the constant transnational negotiation and resistance to a simple dyad of inclusion-exclusion that characterizes Asian American racial formation. For Palumbo-Liu, the slash is a grammatical sign that militates against the easy deferral of Asian to American. It facilitates understanding about the liaisons between Asian and American in a hybrid, oftentimes ambivalent, manner. As he notes, "It at once instantiates a choice between two terms, their simultaneous and equal status, and an element of undecidability that is, as it at once implies both exclusion and inclusion."¹³ Attending to different historical moment's imaginings of each term's cultural distance from the other, the "politics of heterogeneity and difference is neither celebrated nor subjugated, but is instead historicized and particularized."¹⁴ Phan's work is a literary rendering of this instantiation insofar as its linked stories move through the landscapes of both national spaces without privileging one over the other as an authentic homeland. In fact the very notion of a homeland is put into crisis by a "never meeting." Lowe notes that hybridity, by definition, refuses the logic of assimilation because of the hybrid individual's ability to renew oneself and to renegotiate the terms of existence under unequal conditions.

Multiplicity, the final term in Lowe's critical triptych, emphasizes the notion that subjects are multiply located along varied axes of power. Here, one can think of the efficacy of an intersectional analysis that would understand the subject to be multiply acted upon by forces of homophobia, patriarchy, and class warfare. Discussing Trinh T. Minh-Ha's articulation of feminism as constructed through and across a multiplicity of differences, Lowe notes, "the conceptualization of racism and sexism as if they were distinctly opposed discourses is a construction that serves the dominant formations; we cannot isolate 'race' from 'gender' without reproducing the logic of domination."¹⁵

Of note here is Michel Foucault's idea that discursive systems wield power. Racism and sexism operate discursively to replicate conditions of inequality that operate simultaneously on the subject. To rank oppressions is to fail to acknowledge the ways in which racism and sexism are often imbricated within similar systems of power. Indeed, Lowe's reading of *Dogeaters* takes into account the intersections of imperialism, class conflict, race, and sexuality in its multivoiced narratives, particularly in the figure of Joey Sands, a young male prostitute himself a product of a Filipina sex worker and a black American GI. As a character, Sands's multiplicity is not one that is necessarily advantageous or celebrated simply because he inhabits multiple subject positions. Rather, his multiplicity becomes a source of precarity and possibility produced by a historical and social order organized through colonialism. Other Filipino American novels like those of R. Zamora Linmark, *Rolling the R's* (1995) and *Leche* (2011), reveal other racial formations particular to Hawai'i and its distinct colonial and labor history. *Rolling the R's* offers an antibildung of a motley crew of young locals in a neighborhood of Kalihi, where the intermingling of Pacific Islander, American, and Asian cultures marks local Hawaiian culture, whose sound and sensibility are different from that of the U.S. mainland. *Leche* explores the failed and queered migrant return of a Filipino American from Hawai'i.¹⁶ As cultural critic Robert Diaz notes about Linmark's transnational vision,

Leche unravels the contradictions that mark the balikbayan's limited articulations within prevalent discourses of return. Eschewing celebratory versions of return often articulated by the diaspora as tied to familial and economic responsibility, *Leche* mobilizes distance, mistranslation, unreciprocated desire, and even failure as a way to imagine what alternative forms of homecoming might look and feel like for queer individuals.

Diaz identifies this unique quality of *Leche*, both in Filipino and Asian American literary work, in relation to its setting during Corazon Aquino's tenure (one of the few Filipino American novels to do so), as a "reflection on how the realities of post-Marcosian governmentality depend on previous dictatorial policies and recuperative acts." Diaz concludes that, "multiple vantage points for seeing Manila foreground Linmark's critique of the paradoxical ways in which cultural discourses have unwittingly produced 'good' returnees (i.e. overseas contract workers) and 'bad' ones (the occasional diasporic tourist)."¹⁷

In light of such forms of multiplicity, Lowe's essay is at its most innovative in its simultaneous embrace and complicating of difference. In rejecting the

notion that claiming similitude through assimilation is necessarily the goal for Asian American literary, political, and social transformation, Lowe's essay also strongly rejects prevailing multiculturalist ideologies that would seek erasures of difference as a necessary first step to "becoming" American. As David L. Eng and Alice Hom note, Lowe's "work provides a careful consideration of the numerous competing social differences that work to produce historical and contemporary versions of minoritized Asian American subjects."¹⁸ With its insistence on articulating a vocabulary of difference and in emphasizing alternate and varied forms of difference, Lowe paints a much more complex, and arguably more compelling, portrait of the Asian American cultural terrain, and the possibilities that lie therein.

Literary Applications

While the conceptual framework that Lowe advanced in "Heterogeneity, Hybridity and Multiplicity" has been foundational within Asian American literary studies, it is also notable for ushering in new forms of critique. In addition to creating new analytical spaces for previously ignored texts, Lowe's essay provides a way to rethink the popularity of works that would be traditionally derided or decried as "fake" or "inauthentic" because their primary appeal is derived from their status as commodities, which package Asian American ethnicity into easily consumable forms of difference. In her work on the novel as palatable commodity, Mannur has been drawn to Lowe's writing for the ways in which her theoretical formulation of difference might help to describe the appeal of novels such as Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* or Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni's *Mistress of Spices*.¹⁹ Similarly Pamela Thoma's work on Asian American women's popular literature and its exploration of the "narrative payout" expected of the novel about neoliberal belonging is similarly part of a critical trajectory that is introduced by Lowe's brief reconsideration of Tan's novel.²⁰ Consider that for many mainstream readers, the first and only Asian American "literary" text that they will know is one that is written by Tan.²¹ Though Tan occupies – for good reason – an uneasy relationship within the canon of Asian American literature, her work, notably the novel *The Joy Luck Club*, has often blended into the multicultural curriculum for its depiction of the archetypal "Asian American" experience. Indeed, with its focus on the paradigmatic struggle between first-generation immigrant mothers and second-generation American-born daughters, a novel like *The Joy Luck Club* seems to encapsulate the themes of the "Asian American experience" and what Sau-Ling Wong has described as the phenomenon of

“sugar sisterhood.”²² The classic struggle between filial piety and the desire to affiliate with a new experience, and arguably to assimilate into a monolithic concept of respectable, (upper) middle-class Americanness, is a current that runs through Tan’s novels. The four daughters in her works battle against the traditions of their mothers to lead the kinds of “American” lives they wish to lead. In this context, Asianness and Americanness always already exist in a relationship of irreconcilable difference because of generational differences, a reading that “displaces (and privatizes) intercommunity differences into a familial opposition.”²³

But when one reads a novel like *The Joy Luck Club* through the critical lens provided by Lowe wherein “ethnicity [is] a fluctuating composition of differences, intersections, and incommensurabilities,” it becomes possible to access radically different interpretations.²⁴ Instead of seeing a novel like *The Joy Luck Club* exclusively as affirming of the staid mother-daughter tale and affirming of an unbridgeable cultural and generational divide, Lowe suggests we can also read it as a commentary on the trope of the mother-daughter relationship, of class and cultural tropes imposed around Asianness and Americanness, and of the aestheticization of “mother-daughter relationships in its discourse about Asian Americans.”²⁵ By revisiting this critically much-maligned novel and positioning it as a material object, itself subject to the vagaries of difference, Lowe’s essay makes clear that the acknowledgment of differences, including political differences, is not a weakness but an inherent strength for Asian American studies.²⁶

Ultimately, Lowe’s essay makes clear that inclusion alone is an unsatisfactory tool for critical analysis because the nation is a site that must be taken to task. Moreover, multiculturalism and the terms by which subjects of color such as Asian Americans are included within the nation must be upended. In the period preceding Lowe’s critical interventions, largely spurred by the *Aiiieeeee!* group of critics, much of the contentiousness of the term *Asian American* derived from identifying who could legitimately lay claim to the term. Essays such as “Come All Ye Asian Americans of the Real and the Fake” were quick to dismiss the contributions of women and queer writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston on the grounds that they did not accurately and authentically represent the voice and experiences of Asian Americans. Tired as this debate may now seem, Frank Chin articulates how feminism and queerness are anathema to the tenets of cultural nationalism. The quest to locate and trace a distinct Asian American voice and sensibility reveals significant anxieties over who might properly claim to be the subjects and inheritors of Asian America.²⁷ Yet Lowe’s essay takes the necessary next step

by asserting that the term *Asian American* is not characterized by sameness or purity of tradition any more than all Asians or all Americans are the same. Rather, if difference is the guiding principle in thinking through the articulation of Asian America, inclusion no longer remains the dominant question that should necessarily animate literary studies in particular. Instead, attention to the socio-political-cultural forms of difference becomes central. Yet Lowe's emphasis on multiplicity as a form of understanding difference exposes the possibility of thinking about difference beyond identitarian vectors. Where Cheung's essay seeks to implode the nationalism-feminism binary with recourse to the Chinese American reader-critic, thus remaining moored within Chinese American identity formation, Lowe's essay takes the analysis one step further. More than posing the question as one that unnecessarily confounds the (Chinese) American critic, Lowe's argument lays bare the underlying anxieties about difference that structure the anti-feminist stance of the *Aiiiiieee!* group. To unravel difference and to proffer complicated genealogies for difference that have roots in the language of immigration and juridical policy in the United States rather than in terms of "Who gets it right," thus allows for greater possibilities of coalitional work across and through differences.²⁸

Heterotopias to Strange Differences

Michel Foucault's heterotopias offer significant inroads into thinking about how to conceptualize Asian American difference.²⁹ Does the notion of heterotopia, and particularly Lowe's formulation of heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity, continue to be of value in and beyond Asian America? While it is now *de rigueur* to consider intersectional analysis of race, class, gender, and sexuality, Lowe's work provided a nuanced articulation of how and why to think through cross-racial affiliation. Certainly one sees the seeds of this idea developed in Lowe's articulation of how and where coalitional formations such as "women of color," as developed in the writings of Chela Sandoval, Angela Davis, Trinh T. Minh Ha, and others, might be analogous to the formation of Asian American coalitional formations. Where the notion of the interethnic had significant purchase, Lowe's innovation was to move beyond the interethnic or intraethnic to explore the structuring of differences that operate along multiple axes.

The possibilities that Grace Hong and Rod Ferguson identify in notions of women of color feminism or queer of color critique are built around the notion that one can deploy the mode of the heterotopic to understand the

possibility of the coalitional. In their collection *Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization*, Grace Hong and Roderick Ferguson describe the importance of developing a move away from “older modes of struggle organized around the presumption of homogeneity within racial groupings.” Their proposed mode of understanding, which they name “strange affinities,” stresses the possibilities of identifying comparative analytics that “unsettle received categories and modes of comparison in a way that share a kind of kinship.”³⁰ Hong and Ferguson delineate a critical genealogy between Lowe’s ideas and those that were developed in their formulation of queer of color critique and women of color feminism. Within both types of critique, culture again becomes emphasized as the site where “alternative modes of comparison and affiliation” are produced. Hong and Ferguson also note that in contradistinction to minority nationalisms, which remain heavily invested in certain patriarchal forms of power even as they do the important work of critiquing certain kinds of racial violence and colonial power, women of color feminism and queer of color critique operate under fundamentally different configurations of power. These critical interventions recognize that “difference” operates along axes of power and that naming the differences within “racialized, gendered, sexualized collectivities” is a necessary step if one is to refuse the position that comparisons are necessarily equivalent or internally consistent.³¹

While Lowe’s essay certainly has detractors who criticize its theorized terms and its celebration of the potential of hybridity, it remains a foundational text in the field of Asian American literary studies for the ways in which it insists on thinking about the literary and cultural as arenas through which contradictions about inequality and anxieties about belonging to the nation-state can be analyzed. For example, Steve Yao notes that Lowe’s conceptualization of hybridity, which he contrasts to Mikhail Bakhtin’s, is mostly descriptive and what Yao describes as a condition of “ethnic” culture. Yao writes,

[T]he notion of “hybridity” as it has been developed and applied in Asian American and postcolonial studies really only identifies in the broadest terms a general condition of “ethnic” or “colonial” culture. . . . Consequently, the model of “hybridity” in either of its recently articulated versions serves more of a descriptive than a sharply analytic function.³²

Yet, Lowe’s notion of hybridity stands alongside the terms *heterogeneity*, *multiplicity*, and “*nonequivalence*” to signal the play of intersecting power relations that produce difference in culture. While the terms indeed describe the condition of an “ethnic” positionality, Lowe’s innovation in the 1990s was to shift

the site of critique away from “culture” as a closed system that could be easily represented (“bad” or “good”) to culture as a countersite where critics might explore the contradictions and powers of the state that operate to create the enabling exclusion called the “ethnic,” the “colonial,” and “the minor.” Thus terms are less about description than an exhortation to recast cultural politics of the mid-1990s to attend acutely to new social formations and emerging political coalitions that build culture.

With the insistence on honing our approach to thinking with and through difference and power, Lowe’s work offered a much-needed escape from the problematic “additive” approach to exploring ethnic and racial formation, repudiating the notion that the project of adding to and recovery of new voices in the Asian American literary canon by ethnic group was the primary critical mode in Asian American cultural critique. While pioneering figures in Asian American literary studies, particularly within feminist studies, were insistent on thinking about ways to broaden the canon beyond what the editors of *Aiiieeeee!* had set forward, the model of Asian American literary formation remained mired within an add-on approach in which one merely inserted ethnic groups that had previously been excluded into the fold of literary studies. To open the doors of literary studies meant to add the voices of women, the voices of Korean Americans, the voices of South Asian Americans, the voices of Arab Americans. Certainly these gestures are meaningful for the larger field of Asian American studies, but in terms of critical praxis literary studies will remain mired within the same kinds of questions reverting back to inclusion at moments of crisis unless the debate is continually focused on critique.

Shilpa Davé, Pawan Dhingra, Partha Mazumdar, Lavina Dhingra, Jaideep Singh, and Rajini Srikanth describe the additive approach primarily in pedagogical terms, as one that merely spotlights a different group without questioning or altering paradigms capable of transforming the terms of critical discourse within Asian American studies.³³ Though their critique is formulated in relation to the previously marginal position accorded to South Asian American studies within Asian American studies, their comments are instructive for understanding the dynamics, which Lowe addresses in her essay. Additive approaches have largely functioned as an ethical measure in Asian American literary studies as a way to make up for previous injuries and exclusions, but inclusions alone do not transform the underlying logic through which exclusions operate.³⁴ To cast this in a pedagogical framework, one may consider a hypothetical survey of twentieth-century postmodernism, in which the syllabus might include the typical cast of authors, including Don

DeLillo, Philip Roth, Thomas Pynchon, among other primarily white males, concluding with Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* or Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* at the end of the semester, with no other authors of color or women on the syllabus. Lowe's approach allows us to question whether such inclusion challenges the formation of difference or merely installs the Asian American writer as a representative author fulfilling an additive function for the multiculturalist and increasingly neoliberal demands of the university. We must be attentive to how additive approaches within the literature classroom also operate in service of global capitalism. As Jodi Melamed notes, "literature also enters into the training of transnational professional-managerial classes as an element of the technologies of subjectivity."³⁵ As Asian American texts become included in college syllabi to create "multicultural global citizens," we must remain mindful of the political and social contexts and ends the additive approach bolsters.

Lowe's critical oeuvre, and the essay on "Heterogeneity, Multiplicity, and Hybridity" in particular, serves as a heady but forceful reminder of what seems apparent yet needs to be restated under varied and shifting circumstances. In a moment when Asian American literary studies has made the transnational turn, such that the term is passé, the demand for specificity with which Lowe's essay identifies the histories and processes through which Asian American differences have accrued remains important.³⁶ In an increasingly neoliberal moment, there is an ever-likely danger of further homogenization of "the" Asian subject, and Lowe's essay serves as an important reminder of the need for literary critique to think through the structuring differences of heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity.

Notes

- 1 First published as Lisa Lowe, "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences." *Diaspora* 1.1 (Spring 1991): 24–44, the essay appears as the second chapter of Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996). The article has been republished in the following venues: Min Zhou and James V. Gatewood, eds., *Contemporary Asian American Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2000); Jean Yu-wen Shen Wu and Min Hyoung Song, eds., *Asian American Studies: A Reader* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000); Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, eds., *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2003); Kent A. Ono, ed., *A Companion to Asian American Studies* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2004); Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur, eds., *Theorizing Diaspora* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2003). It has also appeared in Japanese translation in *Shisho: Contemporary Sociology* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten Publishers, 1996).

- 2 Though we remain wary of the accuracy of statistical impact factors, the Project Muse database notes that 314 published articles have cited Lowe's article.
- 3 Although Lowe's *Immigrant Acts* and her subsequent work on *The Intimacies of Four Continents* have collectively had a powerful impact on the field of Asian American literary studies, this essay focuses on the article in question in order to historicize how this landmark article cleaved a space to radically rethink difference in more nuanced terms.
- 4 Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 27.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 68.
- 6 Among the earliest attempts to define Asian American difference was Jeffrey Paul Chan et al., eds., *Aiiieeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writings* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1974). This pioneering anthology was described as the history of "our whole voice" and strategically included literary work by Filipino, Chinese, and Japanese American writers, notably those who could "claim" America by virtue of birth as opposed to immigrant writers or those who writings incorporated transnational perspectives.
- 7 Antonio Gramsci, "History of the Subaltern Classes: Methodological Criteria," *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quinton Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International, 1971), 52–60.
- 8 Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 2.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 67.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 68.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 67.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 68.
- 13 David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/America: Crossing of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 1.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 91.
- 15 Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 69.
- 16 Robert Diaz, e-mail message to author, March 13, 2014.
- 17 Robert Diaz, "Queer Returns and the Modern Balikpapan," in *East of Main Street II*, ed. Leilani Nishime and Shilpa Dave (New York: New York University Press, forthcoming).
- 18 David L. Eng and Alice Y. Hom, eds., *Q&A: Queer in Asian America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 5.
- 19 Chapter 4 of Anita Mannur, *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009) explores this phenomenon in more detail, noting how and why culinary themed novels, or what she refers to as commodity comestibles, might be understood as heterogeneous objects for which we must develop narrative reading strategies in order to attend to the ways in different reading strategies and outcomes can be accessed that would not summarily dismiss popular fiction, particularly writing by women, as "fake." Also see Pamela Thoma, *Asian American Women's Popular Literature: Feminizing Genres and Neoliberal Belonging* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), 153.
- 20 Thoma, *Asian American Women's Popular Literature*, 153.
- 21 In her chapter on heterogeneity, Lowe provides a more thorough reading of *The Joy Luck Club*. See Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 78–81.

- 22 Sau-Ling Wong, "'Sugar Sisterhood': Situating the Amy Tan Phenomenon," in *The Ethnic Canon: Histories, Institutions, and Interventions*, ed. David Palumbo-Liu (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 181.
- 23 Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 93.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 77.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 79–80.
- 26 A new generation of scholars has begun to revisit some of these earlier works that signal the possibility of reading older texts through the lens of multiplicity. Tara Fickle argues that in *Joy Luck Club*, Tan's complex reworking of ludic tropes allows her to posit entirely novel formations of inter- and intragenerational kinship, thus making "*The Joy Luck Club* additionally relevant as an Asian American text." See Tara Fickle, "American Rules and Chinese Faces: The Games of Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*," *MELUS* 39.3 (Fall 2014): 68–88.
- 27 See the foreword to John Okada's *No-No Boy* wherein the writers lament a lost father figure in tracing the genealogy of Asian American voice. Chin's diatribe against writers like Maxine Hong Kingston is most directly challenged in King-Kok Cheung's remarkable essay, "The Woman Warrior versus the Chinaman Pacific: Must a Chinese American Critic Choose between Feminism and Heroism?," in *Maxine Hong Kingston's Woman Warrior: A Casebook*, ed. Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 113–33. An intervention such as Cheung's helpfully recasts the question of authenticity, asking why critics must choose between these two options of feminism and cultural nationalism.
- 28 Mark Chiang puts forward the argument that exhorts critics to revisit the larger context of the *Aiiieeeee!* project. Noting that there was a widespread failure among literary critics to recognize that the editors' original aim had less to do with prescribing a politics of Asian American culture than to provide "'serious art' with a political rationale," Chiang reminds us to think about the rhetoric of the authors by also examining what they were "arguing for" in that cultural moment as producers of literary work. Mark Chiang, *The Cultural Capital of Asian American Studies: Autonomy and Representation in the University* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).
- 29 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces Heterotopias," *Architecture / Mouvement / Continuité* 5 (October 1984): 46–9.
- 30 Grace Hong and Roderick Ferguson, eds., *Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 18–19.
- 31 *Ibid.*
- 32 Steve Yao, *Foreign Accents: Chinese American Verse from Exclusion to Post Ethnicity* (London: Oxford University Press, 2010), 21.
- 33 Shilpa Davé et al., "De-privileging Positions: Indian Americans, South Asian Americans and the Politics of Asian American Studies," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 3.1 (1991): 67–100.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 71.
- 35 Jodi Melamed, "Reading Tehran in Lolita: Making Racialized and Gendered Difference Work for Neoliberal Multiculturalism," in Hong and Ferguson, *Strange Affinities*, 89.

- 36 Here, we deviate also from Mark Chiang's assessment that "Lowe's argument functions first and foremost as a claim that Asian American literature is most properly read by Asian Americanist critics" (Chiang, *The Cultural Capital of Asian American Studies*, 128). In providing a space to think through the possibility of Asian American critique that maintains a commitment to thinking through the political, Lowe's formulation makes no claims to the identity of the literary critic. Rather, Lowe insists on a form of critique that would understand that an ethical approach to reading Asian American literature understand its situatedness in political and social formations in addition to aesthetic categories.

Whose Asias?

SAMIR DAYAL

A comparatist, transnationalist perspective on Asia and the South Asian diaspora in Britain and the United States is instructive – even, as Benedict Anderson suggests, necessary: as he emphasizes, nations are best understood in a relational frame.¹ Yet such a perspective is predicated on acknowledging differences between the historical provenances and spatial trajectories of British and North American Asian diasporas. These divergences complicate the notion of “Asia” and problematize received identity formulations such as “Asian American” and “British Asian.” This chapter considers the work of several South Asian diasporic novelists— Salman Rushdie, Hari Kunzru, Mohsin Hamid, and Bharati Mukherjee –as illustrative of the problematization of national and identitarian categories. These works invite a reframing of “Asia” not as a singular category but as a pluralized and shifting matrix of identity positions, albeit notionally anchored to nation-state formations.

“Asia” in the United Kingdom signals primarily South Asia; in the United States, it usually evokes East and Southeast Asia. The history of South Asian migration into Britain is indelibly marked by the transition from colonialism to post- or neocolonialism. After the British withdrew from the Indian Subcontinent in 1947, it was “partitioned” between Pakistan and India. As subjects of the Commonwealth, many Indians migrated into Britain through third countries including Uganda, the Caribbean, or British Guiana. Migration from South Asia after Independence and Partition accelerated steadily; by the end of the twentieth century more than nine million people of South Asian extraction were dispersed across the “Black Water” (*kala pani*), losing their connection to their native land but gaining other communities – across Continental Europe, Africa, the Caribbean, the Pacific Islands, the Middle East, Britain, North America, and elsewhere in Asia.

The United Kingdom has the largest diasporic South Asian population in the Western world: by 1991, the census reported, the minority population exceeded three million, or 5.5 percent of the population. Chicken tikka masala

is now acknowledged as the national dish of England, and Indians constitute fewer than 2 percent of that population – the largest ethnic minority. They are an increasingly prominent political and economic presence. As Judith Brown writes, although migration from or to India was hardly unprecedented, it was “rapidly and dramatically transformed by new modes of travel, within the political context of imperialism and decolonization, and the economic environment created by the industrialisation of the western world”; South Asian migrants are “increasingly, if often unwittingly, players in a global world.”² Besides, diasporic Asians collude in the confection of often discrepant images of “Asia.” Thus the need to pluralize Asia.

In England, ethnic identity forms a very multicultural topography. Radicalized Jews, Afro-Caribbeans, and East Asian migrants negotiate multiple group memberships and often form enclaves relegated to particular cities (Birmingham, Bradford) or suburban zones (Golders Green, North London). But then all identity, as Stuart Hall emphasized, is discursively constructed in situated and contextual frames – sometimes challenging sedimented notions of “Englishness.”³ Brown maintains that “the British case” has “particular significance” because of its varied histories of Asian immigration, over several generations and into an increasingly complex multicultural social environment.⁴ This chapter goes further, querying the notion of “identity” as a static and pre-given analytical category.

The need to pluralize “Asia” and complicate received formations of Asian identities is even more pressing in North America, where Indian Americans are not the predominant Asian American ethnic group. Indians first came to Washington State and Vancouver (the Japanese steamship *Komagata Maru*, with 276 British-passport-holding Indians from Punjab, arrived in Vancouver in 1914 but was sent back by Canada under exclusion laws). Today Indian Americans are increasingly represented in popular culture, from *The Simpsons* to programs featuring yoga, meditation classes, Deepak Chopra, and Indian food. Nevertheless, South Asian American diasporics almost by definition find themselves athwart identities. Their self-fashionings in life as in literature and cinema are double-voiced. This doubleness is not binarism, but rather a refusal of binaries. Homi Bhabha casts postcolonial studies as a discursive frame in which hybridity operates to undermine simple binary oppositions: diaspora falls on the side of the partial, the mobile, the unsettled, and unhomed (*Unheimlich*). Yet the project of the pluralization of Asia is also postcolonial in resisting a sublation of the sign of Asia within a presumptively normative Western modernity, and deconstructive in putting under erasure any identitarian affirmation.

The question then is how to articulate “Asias” in a bifocal framing: how to think “Asia” in a global perspective and, simultaneously, to imagine Asia from within, “organically.” In the first instance, it is better to speak of “Asias” than of “Asia” – to “pluralize Asia.” However, as Spivak writes, it is equally important “not to let the plurality of Asia be selectively studied according to the directions of US foreign policy.” A pluralized Asia “not only respects, but attempts to know the differences within Asia as imaginatively as possible.” Furthermore, “‘Asia’ is not a place, yet the name is laden with history and cultural politics. It cannot produce a naturalized homogeneous ‘identity.’”⁵

To pluralize Asia is not to promote pan-Asianism of the kind endorsed by Abanindranath Tagore, nephew of Rabindranath Tagore, India’s Nobel laureate for literature (1913). Collaborating with Japanese art critic Kakuzo Okakura Tenshin, Abanindranath sought to forge a pan-Asian brotherhood of nations, as I have discussed elsewhere. This cultural alliance, Okakura argued, would challenge imperialist hegemony and other impositions of Western influence on Asia by championing a separate, regional Asian destiny, at variance with Western notions of modernity and progress.⁶ The initiative constructed India as a cultural source for pan-Asianism, in particular as the ancestor of Japanese Buddhist aesthetic ideas.

Neither does pluralizing Asia mean reinventing a neo-Orientalist bazaar, or museum, of exotic representations in opposition to a hegemonic universal ideal marked as Occidental. It would be a pyrrhic victory if pluralizing Asia only reentrenched Western norms, becoming a spectacle of reassuring, fetishized otherness for Western eyes. Yet a challenge implicit in pluralizing Asia is that it entails a negotiation with the West.

This negotiation is relayed through diasporic and transnational formations, and is contingent on one’s geopolitical location. However, in the new regime of what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call “Empire,” location is attenuated almost to the point of becoming immaterial – or dematerialized: “a people is defined not simply in terms of a shared past and common desires or potential, but primarily in dialectical relation to its Other, its outside. A people (whether diasporic or not) is always defined in terms of a *place* (be it virtual or actual). Imperial order, in contrast, has nothing to do with this dialectic.” For diasporas, “the nation seems at times to be the only concept available under which to imagine the community of the subaltern group. . . . It may be true, as Benedict Anderson says, that a nation should be understood as an imagined community – but here we should recognize that the claim is inverted so that *the nation becomes the only way to imagine community!*”⁷ A purely postcolonialist account of diasporas, conceptualizing contemporary globalization as either a

reprise of old forms of colonialism or as varieties of neocolonialism, proves inadequate to the reality: contemporary diasporas are more complexly articulated with forms of globalized circulations of capital and labor, but also with global flows of cultural images – imaginaries that furnish raw, and unpredictable, material for diasporic self-fashioning.

Salman Rushdie's Fictions of a Pluralized Asia

The “search for wholeness, for a coherent and authentic identity, cuts across all the literature of Asian America.”⁸ But this goes only so far, and if “authenticity” is taken as a telos for “all fictions,” we are likely to end up with a distorted or partial understanding of identity construction. Diasporic South Asian self-fashioning is a complicated matter in the works of Salman Rushdie, now living and writing in the United States after having established his reputation in Britain. The best-known Indian diasporic writer, he is a lightning rod for controversy and a figurehead for writerly freedom of speech. He has consciously constructed himself as an embodiment of secular cosmopolitanism across the Brown Atlantic – and talisman of the threat to this ideal. Fabulae of diasporic experience, his works are significant precisely because iconically transnational, and even (especially?) at their most fantastical spur debate about the meaning of “Indianness.” Rushdie’s work spans and pivots between “locations” – India, Pakistan, England, and the United States; indeed this corresponds to his lived experience. Salman’s father Anis Ahmed Rushdie, a Kashmiri Muslim, moved his family to Pakistan. Anis invented the family name, “Rushdie,” in homage to polymath Averroes (Ibn Rushd). Rushdie *films* attended Rugby and read history at King’s College, Cambridge, writing a thesis on Islam; his early career was as a British Asian writer, but in the aftermath of the critical episode of the *fatwa* pronounced by Ayatollah Khomeini, Rushdie concluded that his prospects looked brighter across the pond. His translation across the Atlantic in 2000 is discussed in his recent “memoir” ironically cross-dressed as fiction, *Joseph Anton* (2012).

A second sense in which Rushdie’s work is transnational is in registering *movement or migrancy across national borders*. This “trans” finds its correlative in Rushdie’s trademark fictional theme of endless “transformations” of identity. Rushdie’s first novel *Grimus* (1975) was a minor work, a blend of allegory, faux-mythology, and science fantasy; the novel that established him as a major voice of contemporary literature, allowing him to leave a safe and successful career as copy writer for Ogilvy & Mather, was *Midnight’s Children* (1980). An instance of “nonrepresentative” representation, it was simultaneously

unprecedented in the Indian canon (with the possible exception of G.V. Desani's *All About H. Hatterr*) and *representative* voice of "South Asia." It thematizes the question of national identity for the generation born as the new nation came into existence in 1947 (also the year of Rushdie's own birth).

The "remarkable value given to self-fashioning through a particular kind of individualized reading and writing is entirely recognizable to Western middle-class readers of 'literary' novels," as Asad reminds us, "but not to most Muslims in Britain or the Indian subcontinent."⁹ Yet precisely because it provokes reflection on the complexities of self-fashioning, *Midnight's Children* is an important intervention in the public sphere. The novel turns on the twinned fates of Saleem Sinai and his foil, Shiva, both born at the stroke of midnight as India gained its independence. Saleem was switched from one family (Hindu) to another (Muslim); his identity, though "false," is connected through his magical gifts (his extraordinary nose, with olfactory capacities to match) with India's other midnight's children.

Rushdie next published *Shame* (1983), set with a transnational (or politically oppositional) logic, in Pakistan. This novel takes inspiration from the historical and political fortunes of political leaders Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, instrumental in defining Pakistan's – and therefore South Asia's – contemporary history.

The Satanic Verses (1988), dramatizing the "trans-" of geocultural translation or migrancy, was a turning point in Rushdie's career. Rushdie's own migration to England from Asia is encoded into the framing narrative of two conjoined protagonists, Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha, falling from a plane hijacked and blown up en route from India to England in a transitional/transnational (non-)space, between the Continent and Britain, between the former colonial center and "Asia." They fall, sans parachute, wrestling with each other, onto a beach in Cornwall. This fall adumbrates their ongoing, picaresque struggles to find their twinned destinies. Simultaneously foils and alter egos (not *Doppelgänger*) for each other, they figuratively reverse the colonizer's transformative imperial adventure, rehearsing the classic postcolonial translation of "writing back to the empire." Their intertwined – and confused – identities speak to the central themes of identity, self-construction, and self-deconstruction. Characteristically for Rushdie, magical realist phenomena merge seamlessly with political and social actuality.

Elsewhere I have suggested that a possible postcolonial reading of the title's adjective, "satanic," is that it points to the personal/psychic, social, and political "incompleteness" of the postcolonial migrant subject: his or her minority condition. It is not just a squib against the presumptive infallibility of the

Koran and of Islam – the reductive interpretation offered as a rationalization for the *fatwa*. The figure of Satan is interesting (to Rushdie, as for John Milton) as a figure for the aspiration to transmute incompleteness into “potentiality and potency.”¹⁰ Not that all diasporic texts are political – indeed many are resolutely apolitical, often to their own detriment. (Admittedly, self-consciously political allegories may prove more interesting for their literary or aesthetic merits than for any political insights they encode or fold within their “textiles.”)

The novel dramatizes how the majority exercises power over minorities through the power of description. No better example exists of such vitiation through description (“name-calling”?) than Enoch Powell’s 1968 “Rivers of Blood” speech, which warned that unless migrants from non-Western countries were repatriated, England would find itself awash in “rivers of blood.” He reprised that sentiment forty years later in 2008, arguing that civil unrest was imminent in Britain largely as an effect of (nonwhite) immigration. What Powell succeeded in doing was demonizing, redescribing, the nonwhite immigrant as alien. Rushdie explores the implications of, and the imperative to resist, a representational rhetoric reliant on such demonization – or “satanization.” It is sobering to remember that “the steady stream over the years of murders of black British citizens by white racists has never provoked a denunciation, by government or liberal opinion, of the white British population. Nor do ordinary black British citizens who are constantly threatened by white racists always obtain the police protection they need.”¹¹

Ostensibly, the novel reimagines the life and experience of the prophet Mohammed. A key preoccupation is the purported infallibility of controversial verses in the Koran, the so-called satanic verses in which the three Pagan female deities of Mecca, or “Jahilia” – Lat, Manat, and Uzza – are presented as the objects of prayers for intercession by the faithful. The dispute is whether these are illegitimate verses in the sanctioned narrative of the life of Mohammed (here called, to some insultingly, “Mahound”). The prophet first permits the prayers to the polytheistic goddesses, later rescinds this permission as an error introduced into the sacred narration by the devil – “Shaitan” or “Satan,” associated with mischief. The agent of Satan in the novel is irreverent and subversive poet Baal. He colludes with the priestess Hind to oppose Mahound, and takes refuge, when the now-popular Mahound returns to the city, in a brothel where the prostitutes are given the names of the prophet’s wives.

As if reality were imitating fiction, Rushdie was unintentionally conscripted to play the part of subversive writer, in the furor following the *fatwa*. Rushdie was clearly conscious that he was confecting a fiction uncomfortably close

to parody of the story of Mohammed – the best proof being the author's elaborate public disavowals. For example, Rushdie wrote in a letter to India's prime minister, when the book was banned in the country: "I am accused of having 'admitted' that the book is a direct attack on Islam. I have admitted no such thing, and deny it strongly. The section of the book in question (and let's remember that the book isn't actually about Islam, but about migration, metamorphosis, divided selves, love, death, London and Bombay) deals with a prophet – who is not called Mohammed – living in a highly fantastical city made of sand. . . ." ¹² He increasingly recognized he could not evade politics. He protested that a new "thought police," ruled by the clerics, was enforcing an increasing intolerance of any criticism of, or even non-Muslim commentary on, Islam. ¹³ Yet "in deriding the very idea of rules of conduct ('rules about every damn thing. . . . It was as if no aspect of existence was to be left unregulated, free'), Rushdie invokes the assumptions of liberal individualism that have reached their apogee in Thatcher's Britain . . . [N]either in politics nor in morality is it an uncontested truth to say that being unregulated is being really free." ¹⁴ Diaspora becomes for Rushdie a groundless ground from which to rethink both "metropolitan" life and rootedness in a territorial homeland: not just geopolitical *belonging*, but, more fundamentally, existential and even ontological *being*. Chamcha succumbs to alienating descriptions of who he might be, even becoming an apologist for British racism against immigrants insisting on "their fair share" in British society. His obsessive question about "Mahound" is also reflexively turned upon himself: "*What kind of idea is He? What kind am I?*" ¹⁵

Though the author has increasingly turned his attention away from British to American settings, he has retained an interest in exploring transnationalism and multiculturalism. After Rushdie's next "translation," to the United States, he published *Fury* (2001), the story of an Indian professor in London who abandons his marriage to an English woman to start a new life in New York, hoping through a transnational transformation of himself to escape his guilt about contemplating killing his wife while she slept, in a fit of "fury." But he discovers that it is not so easy to escape one identity with all its accretions and slip into another skin no matter how much of the local argot and pop culture he adopts. This novel is an exploration of the persistence of sedimented selfhood.

Some years after *Fury* Rushdie published the thoroughly transnational *Shalimar the Clown* (2005), spanning Kashmir and the United States. Rushdie signals concerns about the political threat to Kashmir and underscores the importance of transnational connections among India, Pakistan, Afghanistan,

the Philippines, and the United States, whether those connections manifest in diplomacy or transnational terrorism (the character Ophuls is a former ambassador and a counterterrorism specialist). This chapter, however, focuses on *Satanic Verses* as an iconic exploration of individual identity and “a reflection upon one very specific political-cultural encounter,” as Asad avers. This observation is extendable to much of Rushdie’s *oeuvre* and to texts by other authors that take the representation of “Asia” and South Asians as principal subjects.¹⁶ The “Asia” projected by liberal Western multiculturalist discourse is not necessarily the “Asia” envisioned by Asians, whether they live in South Asia or elsewhere. This then is another reason to pluralize both national and diasporic self-fashioning.

Hari Kunzru’s Novels: Labile and Mobile Selves

Like Rushdie, Hari Kunzru has a Kashmiri connection. Of Kashmiri Pandit (but also Anglican) ancestry he is like Rushdie an illuminating example of a trans-Atlantic diasporic South Asian writer who tests many identitarian bromides. He resists being identified with a religious community, and has written passionately about the ethical atheism he finds increasingly distances him from “devout Hindus and Anglican Christians” in his own family, let alone conservative faith communities that presume to embody “Indianness” or “Englishness.”¹⁷ By contrast, he notably declined the prestigious John Llewellyn Rhys Prize for under-thirty-five writers, objecting its backing by the conservative paper *The Mail on Sunday*, which had taken a public stance against blacks and Asians, particularly immigrants. Kunzru identifies as an Asian immigrant. Based in New York, he is a British citizen and diasporic author of the novels *The Impressionist*, *Transmission*, *My Revolutions*, and a recent novel that is set entirely in the United States, *Gods without Men*.¹⁸ Kunzru published the short story collection *Noise* (2005) and has written for British news outlets including *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Guardian*, and *Wired UK*. I discuss only Kunzru’s first novel, because it established his reputation and is the most germane to my argument regarding the doubleness endemic to diasporic South Asian experience and literary representations.

The Impressionist, structured episodically, begins with a subplot. Ronald Forrester, riding through a desolate Indian landscape, is trapped in a flash flood but is miraculously rescued by a woman, Amrita, with whom he has sex – but then is swept away again, having impregnated her. Amrita dies giving birth to the child, appropriately named Pran (literally, the “breath of life”); he has the traditional horoscope drawn up by the attending astrologer, who

is confused and alarmed: “It was a shapeshifting chart. A chart full of lies.” So he decides to tear up the horoscope and discard it, substituting a much more “banal” prediction of the course of Pran’s life.¹⁹ Though his name denotes the essential life force, Pran, it turns out, has no fixed identity. His is the story of a chameleon picaro. Subsequent episodes describe his adventures in inhabiting different locations, different selves: but he never acquires substance, or essential identity, as he realizes most unambiguously at the end of the book through a kind of kenosis or emptying out of himself. But to get there he must embody, or endure, different incarnations.

Pran inherits extraordinarily pale skin, often a token of superiority and even beauty among South Asians, but also of “difference.” Pran is “undeniably good looking. His hair has a hint of copper to it, which catches in the sunlight, reminding people of the hills. Kashmiris are typically fair, but Pran’s color is exceptional. It is proof, cluck the aunties, of the family’s superior blood.”²⁰

After Amrita dies, Pran is incorporated into the household of Pandit Amar Nath Razdan, who takes her as his wife, bestowing his family name on Pran. But when this father who is not his father dies, Pran Nath is thrown out of his own house by the servants he had terrorized, and divested of everything he had. Destitute, he is directed to join “his own community,” the mixed-race demographic called in India “Anglo-Indians.” But he is not of them either, or not yet. They congregate in the Agra Post and Telegraph Club, in an ongoing orgy of self-hatred and *méconnaissance* that takes the form of abjecting and othering the natives, their brothers, whom they consider their inferiors: “the horrid blackie whites gather together to swap their own stories of disgustingness, the disgustingness of natives, the foul Indianness of native ways and the firm manner in which they, the husbands, put down their employees, and they, the wives, chastise their servants, if they have them. . . . They, the Anglo-Indian community, know where their loyalties lie. They know which side of themselves they favor.” Even though everyone knows that despite their identification with “Home home home!” none of them “has been anywhere near England.”²¹

Kunzru highlights and ironizes the colonial stereotype of the “native,” and thereby the neo-Orientalism Edward Said was at such pains to suggest was characteristic of European colonizers in their relationships with the colonized, and which infected these not-quite-not-whites. Kunzru is only too aware of the legacies of colonialism and the history of miscegenation – the dark side, we might say, of hybridity. Also noteworthy is what I have been highlighting as the need for a transnational framing of diasporic South Asian fiction: Kunzru’s Anglo-Indians have mostly never left India yet imagine that home is England,

their true selves something other than Indian. It becomes increasingly clear that Kunzru's aim is to cast Pran as a shape-shifter in order to elaborate on his larger ontological – antiessentialist – theme: Pran is revealed to be destitute of “the pearl faculty, the faculty which secretes selfhood round some initial grain.”²² In Bombay, inhabiting the temporary identity of “Pretty Bobby,” Pran reveals his gift for mimicry that will facilitate his shape-shifting: “Bobby’s capacity for mimicry ... can reduce British Other Ranks to fits by imitating regional accents. Oroight there, mate? Och, ye dinnae wanna worrit yersel’ Now then, sirs, if you please to follow me I know a very good place ... Bobby deals in stereotypes, sharply drawn.”²³ It is precisely in such thematization of stereotype that the author seeks to subvert the stereotypes that are often entrenched by identity politics.

Even if Pran is not always deliberate in his drag or other mimicry, he functions as a vehicle for the antiessentialism and pluralized notions of Asianness structuring Kunzru's fiction. The author broaches these somewhat counterintuitive ideas in a complex and sophisticated manner. His achievement represents a new direction in diasporic South Asian fiction – not merely to “struggle with finding one's identity” but to complicate identity formation and renounce simplistic identity politics. Pran's story is informed by historically important events and phenomena: Kunzru's vision is irreducibly political, indexed to the colonial and the postcolonial.

The Perils of Passing

Pran's attempts to pass – his passage through a series of impersonations – is reminiscent of an iconic Asian American text, Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*, another account of a failed search for community in which the protagonist's “faking” of different identities registers the impossibility of truly belonging. The protagonist, a kind of antihero and diasporic hybrid, is Wittman Ah Sing, master of shifting identity positions, as his name suggests: for he is both an ethnic Whitman and an Asian American “singer” of a new and incommensurably different “barbaric yawp.” Wittman's picaresque tale gestures to the Beat generation, only he is somehow less “beat” than they were; as a sixties graduate of the elite University of California–Berkeley, his “yawp” is irreducibly double-voiced in mainstream American society. He vehemently disassociates himself from his ethnic brethren, new Chinese immigrants, insisting on being an American, containing its multitudes, contradictions, and doubleness, as Whitman did: “What had he to do with foreigners? With F.O.B. [fresh-off-the-boat] émigrés? Fifth generation

native Californian that he was. Great Great-Grandfather came on the Nootka, as ancestral as the Mayflower.”²⁴ But neither can Wittman belong to mainstream America.

Though of a younger generation, Kunzru shares with Kingston a desire to engage the problematic of the asymmetries and instability of identities, and the very diction is similar in the passages quoted from the two books, separated – and connected – by the Atlantic. Both novelists ask what might it mean to “belong” unproblematically, or unhyphenatedly, unremarkably, and whether that is a worthy dream for the immigrant or émigré. This question is also a unifying thread linking the works of many younger diasporic writers, including an important book by Korean American novelist Chang-Rae Lee, *Native Speaker*. Such a title can in a diasporic’s case only be ironic. Lee’s book suggests that it is not only diasporics who have unstable identities: America is being unmoored from any definitive “national culture.” This is the threat and the promise borne by immigration, by diasporic literatures. Lee’s protagonist Henry Park has an “alien” identity that coincides neither with itself nor with mainstream Americanness. The protagonist aspires to pass as a “native speaker” precisely because there are no given and fixed identity positions, no clear “ontological bearing.”²⁵ In his recent novel, *On Such a Full Sea*, Lee’s characters inhabit a futurist dystopia, their identities hybridized or deracinated to the point of being entirely detached from territorial anchorings. The narrator is an omniscient first-person plural consciousness that speaks for and about B-Mor (Baltimore? A cheery exhortation to “Be More,” in a parody of the U.S. ROTC mantra, “Be all you can be”?). B-Mor is a labor camp, evoking infamous Chinese factories that exploit workers or, worse, North Korean labor colonies – except that it seems based in the United States or some other First World country. B-Mor produces goods, including fish, for the rich enclaves (the Charters). There is a third dimension of the dystopia, the “Counties,” some of whose inhabitants are marginal or countercultural figures such as Quig, or creepy gymnastic vegans who drug and dismember people to feed to their big carnivorous dogs, like demented ghouls with a “spiritual” credo. Ethnicities are mixed and hybridized. The workers are vaguely Asiatic; there are South Asian doctors like Vikram Upendra even in the elite Charters; the young Asian heroine, Fan, is pregnant by someone called Reg, also of Asian extraction. Fan is however unconnected to the Chinese homeland or anything recognizably Asian. She is something like a manga superhero, living in a manga-like artificially sci-fi futuristic universe, which the author fails to make plausible. Lee’s prose is prolix but not persuasive. Still, the novel is interesting because,

like other important contemporary Asian American fictions, it complicates categories such as “Asia” and “identity” as such.

Bharati Mukherjee: The Shuttle of the American Dream

The problematization of identity is also a question of authorial identity. Consider the case of South Asian American writer Bharati Mukherjee, (in) famously on record for refusing that label, demanding to be taken as an American writer, *tout court*. Some detractors have accused her of bad faith. But Mukherjee does have a point. Being tagged as South Asian American rather than simply American does mark such a diasporic writer as somehow marginal, while white immigrant writers do not share the same burden of proof. What does it take for the diasporic writer to transcend the stigmata of outsidership and become fully and unproblematically integrated? Still, her critics are justified in raising questions about her assimilationism: not only is it a privileged or elite perspective, but it also seems to participate in the occlusion of the politics of class, in the exclusion of nonelite migrant aliens and economically marginalized diasporic residents.

Whatever her politics, Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* offers an important case study for my present purposes. The novel illustrates how crucial a transnational framing is in understanding diasporic literatures under conditions of contemporary globalization.²⁶ The protagonist Jasmine, carrying forged papers, travels across several continents, from rural Punjab to the wrong side of paradise – a Florida that is not quite the “Gold Mountain” sought by many East Asian immigrants but a landscape marked by the depredations of modern Western culture and its bad actors. For what she finds after her arduous journey to the promised land of America is landscape of litter and a society marked by violence.

The epigraph from James Gleick’s *Chaos* adumbrates a chaotic microcosm betokening the new order of globalization: “The new geometry mirrors a universe that is rough, not rounded, scabrous, not smooth. It is a geometry of the pitted, pocked, and broken up, the twisted, tangled, and intertwined.” Half-Face, the sea captain who brings the illegal immigrants to Florida, has a face whose contours mimic this geometry: he had “lost an eye and ear and most of his cheek in a paddy field in Vietnam” as a demolitions expert.²⁷ The physical environs also mirror Gleick’s “chaos”: “The first thing” Jasmine saw “were the two cones of a nuclear plant, and smoke spreading from them in complicated but seemingly purposeful patterns, edges lit by the rising sun,

like a gray, intricate map of an unexplored island continent, against the pale unscratched blue of the sky.” She “waded through Eden’s waste: plastic bottles, floating oranges, boards, sodden boxes, white and green plastic sacks tied shut but picked open by birds and pulled apart by crabs.”²⁸

Having traversed the Middle East, Africa, and Europe, as well as the “black water” of the oceans that traditionally strip a good Hindu of Hinduness, Jasmine finds that even in America violence is always round the next turn. She is raped by Half-Face, and slits his throat after cutting open her own tongue, as if she were a contemporary goddess of destruction, a Kali incarnate who slaughters evil men, tongue dripping blood.²⁹ And, in New York, she is shocked to discover that her husband’s assassin appears to have followed her from the violence of rural India – as if he were the agent of personalized transnational terror.

Certainly Jasmine does not represent all migrants, but in another sense she does *stand in* for migrants, including nonelites: “we are refugees and mercenaries and guest workers; you see us sleeping in airport lounges; you watch us unwrapping the last of our native foods, unrolling our prayer rugs, reading our holy books. . . . We are the outcasts and deportees, strange pilgrims visiting outlandish shrines. . . . We must sneak in, land by night in little-used strips. . . . What country? What continent?”³⁰ Can Jasmine, and by extension Mukherjee, then be defended from the allegation that she is glossing over class differences, blithely optimistic about the American Dream and oblivious to real difficulties facing many poor migrants? In a *Mother Jones* interview, Mukherjee opined that “[i]n this age of diasporas, one’s biological identity may not be one’s only identity. Erosions and accretions come with the act of emigration. The experience of cutting myself off from a biological homeland and settling in an adopted homeland that is not always welcoming to its dark-complexioned citizens has tested me as a person, and made me the writer I am today.” Critiquing her critics, she “choose[s] to describe myself on my own terms, as an American, rather than as an Asian-American,” and alleges that her “rejection of hyphenation has been misrepresented as race treachery by some India-born academics on U.S. campuses who have appointed themselves guardians of the ‘purity’ of ethnic cultures. Many of them, though they reside permanently in the United States and participate in its economy, consistently denounce American ideals and institutions. They direct their rage at me because, by becoming a U.S. citizen and exercising my voting rights, I have invested in the present and not the past; because I have committed myself to help shape the future of my adopted homeland; and because I celebrate racial and cultural mongrelization.” Jasmine seems to be a mouthpiece for the author. Her response

to “the speed of transformation, the fluidity of American character and the American landscape” is to celebrate it, if skittishly and giddily: “I feel . . . like a stone hurtling through diaphanous mist, unable to grab hold, unable to slow myself, yet unwilling to abandon the ride I’m on. Down and down I go, where I’ll stop, God only knows.”³¹ Jasmine, I have written in an essay on the novel, is “a perpetual nomad” who “shuttles between differing identities.”³² Is this lazy and elitist cosmopolitanism or admirable hybridity?

Mohsin Hamid: Falling Stereotypes, Rising Asias

Cosmopolitanism and transnationalism are recurrent themes in many recent South Asian diasporic novels, challenging essentialist constructions of national and personal “authenticity.” Perhaps the diasporic South Asian writer who takes greatest delight in inverting – skewering – stereotypes of “Asia” is Mohsin Hamid. His *Moth Smoke* (2000), like Kunzru’s *The Impressionist*, is informed by a postcolonial and transnational sensibility, an antiessentialist perspective on South Asian self-fashioning. In an interview the author remarks, “I certainly think there is a post-post-colonial generation . . . people who never had a colonial experience. We don’t place a burden of guilt on someone who’s no longer there.”³³ For Hamid, “South Asia” is not a single, primordial entity, and neither is “Pakistan” or “India.” Set in 1998, *Moth Smoke* adapts the historical story of Dara Shikoh, a Mughal prince with liberal sensibilities, persecuted by his powerful brother and rival Aurangzeb; the protagonist Darashikoh Shezad belongs among the liberal – and neocapitalist – elites of modern Lahore. The novel presents an allegory of contemporary Pakistan, in an age of terrorism and nuclear power-plays, particularly the 1998 nuclear tests intended as a signal to Pakistan’s neighbor and “enemy,” India.

Moth Smoke’s backdrop is political and economic globalization; it interrogates essentialisms of identity and belonging, subverting received images of the “Third World” and stereotypes of “Asia,” particularly Pakistan. Yet Hamid’s is a *middle-class* Pakistani Asia rather than a colonialist’s Asia, with all its baggage of the Civilizing Mission. It addresses cosmopolitan as well as domestic South Asian audiences, recasting “Asia” and Asianness in a fresh, postcolonial, frame, and is thus emblematic of an emerging literary counter-canon that includes works by Rushdie, Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Vikram Chandra, Vikram Seth, Arundhati Roy, and Manil Suri, among others. In 2007 Hamid published *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, a novel that punctures mainstream Western preconceptions of Asia – not least by putting the West up to scrutiny. The protagonist Changez, thoroughly assimilated as a diasporic

American, with a fancy Ivy League education and a plum job in finance, grows disillusioned with this American Dream, as if in diametric opposition to Mukherjee's aspirational "American Dreamer" Jasmine. Turning his back on America, Changez becomes the novel's eponymous fundamentalist, though his purported "reluctance" is really an attitude of ironic disillusionment with all the blandishments of contemporary bourgeois capitalism, and skepticism about the West's attitude to the rest of the world – the non-West, especially after 9/11. Hamid tweaks the favorite *bêtes-noires* of the West, especially "the Islamist extremist": Changez sports a stereotypical beard in solidarity with his fellow Muslims; he doesn't spout the expected and comforting clichés of religious fanaticism but rather becomes a professor at a Pakistani university, advocating nonviolence, and indeed its ambiguous conclusion even offers an image of an American who might be a potential assassin.

By contrast with this novel's dramatic monologue, Hamid's more recent novel *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013), addressed entirely to a second-person listener, is, to adapt the *New York Times* review, a cross between pastiche Dale Carnegie self-help/get-rich-quick manual and bitter Bildungsroman/cultural anthropology.³⁴ It is a sardonic chronicle of "our (Pakistani) Asia."

Hamid's work, like that of the other writers considered in the preceding text, highlights the impossibility of fitting even these prominent works onto a single Procrustean bed called "Asian" writing, much less collapse all their different "Asias" into a single entity for that does not correspond to geopolitical realities. Thus recasting "Asia" also refocalizes the United States and England as locations for *imaginary* and therefore fungible anchorings of diasporic identity – not predetermined teloi of South Asian identity, but rather zones for nuanced and historicized negotiations within the contemporary conjuncture: globalization, Empire.

Notes

- 1 Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World* (London: Verso, 1998).
- 2 Judith M. Brown, *Global South Asians: Introducing the Modern Diaspora* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3.
- 3 Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (New York: Routledge, 1996), 446.
- 4 Brown, *Global South Asians*, 7.
- 5 Gayatri Spivak, *Other Asias* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2003), 2, 8–9, 11.
- 6 Samir Dayal, "Re-Positioning India: Tagore's Passionate Politics of 'Love,'" *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 15.1 (Spring 2007): 165–208.

- 7 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 107.
- 8 Gilbert H. Muller, *New Strangers in Paradise: The Immigrant Experience and Contemporary American Fiction* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 203.
- 9 Talal Asad, "Ethnography, Literature, and Politics: Some Readings and Uses of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*," *Cultural Anthropology* 5.3 (October 28, 2009): 239–69.
- 10 Samir Dayal, "Splitting Images: *The Satanic Verses* and the Incomplete Man," in *Ideas of Home: Literature of Asian Migration*, ed. Geoffrey Kain (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1997), 87–100.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 258.
- 12 Rushdie, "India Bans a Book for Its Own Good," *The New York Times* (October 19, 1988): A 27.
- 13 Rushdie, "The Book Burning," *The New York Review of Books* (March 2, 1989): 26.
- 14 Asad, "Ethnography, Literature, and Politics," 254.
- 15 Rushdie, *Satanic Verses*, 111.
- 16 Asad, "Ethnography, Literature, and Politics," 240.
- 17 Hari Kunzru, "Leading a Decent, Purposeful Life Isn't the Sole Province of the Religious," *The Guardian* (July 11, 2014).
- 18 Hari Kunzru, *Gods without Men* (New York: Vintage, 2011).
- 19 Hari Kunzru, *The Impressionist* (New York: Penguin, 2002), 21.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 16.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 37.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 53.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 191.
- 24 Maxine Hong Kingston, *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (New York: Random House, 1989), 18.
- 25 Chang-rae Lee, *Native Speaker* (New York: Riverhead, 1995), 20.
- 26 Bharati Mukherjee, *Jasmine* (New York: Grove Weidenfield, 1989).
- 27 *Ibid.*, 104–5.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 107.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 118–19.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 100–1.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 138–9.
- 32 Dayal, "Splitting Images," 77.
- 33 Mohsin Hamid, *The Chronicle Online* (February 17, 2000). Online resource: <http://www.dukechronicle.com/articles/2000/02/18/mohsin-hamid>.
- 34 Parul Sehgal, "Yes Man: Mohsin Hamid's 'How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia,'" *The New York Times* (March 29, 2013).

The South Asian American Challenge

ASHA NADKARNI

In the 1997 special “India” fiction issue of *The New Yorker*, Salman Rushdie famously claimed that “prose writing . . . by Indian writers working in English is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the eighteen ‘recognized’ languages of India. . . . The true Indian literature of the first postcolonial half century has been made in the language the British left behind.”¹ Rushdie’s claim is controversial not only insofar as it privileges English language literature over literature written in the vernacular languages, but it is also notable for the “imaginary homeland” (to quote Rushdie in another context) it both relies upon and creates.² That is, the community of “Indo-Anglian” writers Rushdie at once recognizes and calls into being as the originators of a “true Indian literature” are constituted *as a community* by their relationship to a geographic location and nationalist context – India – to which they may feel varied degrees of connection and disconnection. Furthermore, although what is being highlighted in the special issue is a specifically “postcolonial” and “Indian” national literature, in fact, as Bill Buford notes in his introductory essay to the issue, few of the featured writers actually live in, and write from, India. Why, then, is this the Indian and not the Indian diasporic issue? Moreover, why is this the “Indian” and not the “South Asian” issue? Buford concedes, parenthetically, that the question is not just “what . . . it means to be an Indian novelist” but also “a Sri Lankan novelist, or one from Pakistan, or one from Britain but with Indian parents,” but in the end this national diversity within South Asia (a region that comprises Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) is erased.

I begin with this much remarked upon special issue of *The New Yorker* for what it reveals about the contours of South Asian American literature, particularly as it pertains to what this chapter is considering the “South Asian American challenge.”³ Why are these primarily diasporic writers, writing in English, credited with creating a national literature? What does this say about postcolonial South Asian nationalisms, and (given that many of the featured

writers are located in the United States and Canada) what does it tell us about North American nationalisms? Why, in other words, are these writers identified as “Indian” and not as American or Canadian, and what does this reveal about the inclusions and exclusions of multicultural North America? Is South Asian Anglophone writing an essentially postcolonial literature that should be read in terms of the authors’ place of origin, or is it a diasporic one to be understood through the national locations in which many of these writers now reside?

Rushdie’s own shifting subject position is suggestive in this regard. Born in Bombay to a Kashmiri Muslim family that eventually relocated to Pakistan, educated in Britain where he lived until 2000, and currently residing in the United States, Rushdie’s identity is hard to pin down. His multiple movements are mirrored in his writing. *The New York Times* praised his groundbreaking 1980 novel *Midnight’s Children* as “a continent finding its voice,” thereby deeming *Midnight’s Children* the quintessential postcolonial South Asian novel and Rushdie the subcontinental spokesman.⁴ If *Midnight’s Children* is a novel about Indian nationalism drawn in part from Rushdie’s childhood in Bombay, his 1988 *The Satanic Verses* is a novel of migration that reflects his relocation to London and that (in his own words) “puts into crisis everything about the migrating individual or group, everything about identity and culture and belief.”⁵ More recently, Rushdie’s 2001 *Fury* and 2005 *Shalimar the Clown* directly speak to U.S. contexts and political preoccupations. *Fury*, published in the months before the events of September 11, 2001 permanently changed not only the landscape of New York but also the place of South Asians within it, is in part an extreme close up of New York’s premillennial golden age. Moving between Rushdie’s Kashmiri past and post-9/11 U.S. present, *Shalimar the Clown* uses multiple histories, locations, and imaginaries to examine global terrorism and U.S. power in South Asia from Bretton Woods to the War on Terror. An attention to Rushdie’s physical location, therefore, is suggestive but not exhaustive; the difficulty of categorizing him and other South Asian diasporic writers is that they can be multiply situated in their imaginations despite their location, at any given moment, in one place.

The “challenge” of South Asian American literature therefore at once consists of and exceeds problems of definition. On the one hand, the very designation “South Asian American” is problematic for the many different ethnic, religious, and national groups it yokes together and for the tendency of this diversity to be elided and erased through Indian hegemony. On the other hand, as a grouping formed through processes of racialization and political solidarity within North American, South Asian American is a useful category even as

it sits uneasily within the larger designation of Asian America. This problem of literary categorization parallels the problem of categorizing South Asian subjects, who have been racialized both as not white (in the 1923 *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* case) and not Asian (in the U.S. census until 1980). South Asian American literature challenges, therefore, precisely because of the multiple subcontinental contexts to which it refers, and because it cannot be neatly confined within the categories of Asian American, American, or postcolonial literature (even if, as we will see, such divisions are false). In fact, it is precisely the ways in which South Asian American literature confounds these boundaries, as scholars such as Rajini Srikanth and Bakirathi Mani have argued, that help to complicate and expand how we conceive of such categories. In short, South Asian American literature makes readers confront the triangulation of British and U.S. empires in processes of South Asian racialization in the United States, forcing us to think about the United States and Britain as aligned and competing empires. In addition, South Asian American literature causes us to consider how the United States assumes the imperial mantle by calling attention to the connections between subcontinental nationalisms, U.S.-led development, and more recent neoliberal projects.

South Asian American Diasporas and Literature, Past and Present

South Asian diasporas to North America and elsewhere are generally understood as having two waves. The first so-called subaltern diaspora of the eighteenth through early twentieth centuries was made up primarily of slaves, indentured laborers, and other kinds of workers to Indian Ocean islands, East Africa, the Caribbean, and the West Coast of North America. In the eighteenth century, much of the diaspora entailed slave labor taken by the Dutch and French to Indian Ocean islands, while the nineteenth-century diaspora was comprised largely of indentured and other kinds of laborers needed to fill the vacuum caused by the British abolition of slavery in 1838.⁶ Turning to North America, South Asian immigration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries consisted primarily of Punjabi men coming to the West Coast of the United States and Canada to farm and work in the timber industry. But exclusionary U.S. land laws (such as the 1913 Alien Land Law, which prohibited noncitizens from owning land and that effectively ended all chances of Indian immigrants to the United States achieving citizenship), and immigration laws (particularly the Asiatic Barred Zone Act of 1917 and the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924) meant that Indian immigration in this time period was limited. Likewise,

in Canada the 1908 Continuous Journey regulation stating that immigrants must travel directly from their country of origin to Canada was specifically enacted to prevent the immigration of Indians who, as British subjects, otherwise had the right to enter the country.⁷ The 1914 *Komagata Maru* incident (where Indian immigrants who had traveled to Canada through Hong Kong and Japan were denied entrance and sent back to India) exemplifies the problem of South Asian immigration to Canada.

In terms of the Anglophone literary legacy of this first wave of diasporics, the political and poetic writings of the Ghadar Party, a transnational Indian nationalist organization founded on the West Coast of Canada and the United States in 1913, are worth mentioning.⁸ Additionally, Indo-Caribbean communities have spawned twentieth- and twenty-first-century writers such as Sam Selvon, V. S. Naipaul, Saseenarine Persaud, David Dabydeen, Rooplall Monar, and Shani Mootoo.⁹ The experiences of first-wave South Asian diasporics have found literary expression in Amitav Ghosh's "Ibis Trilogy" as well as in the work of M. G. Vassanji, to name just two. Ghosh lives in the United States but the trilogy spans India, China, and Mauritius, while Vassanji lives in Canada but his writing primarily focuses on Indians in Kenya. Similarly, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni turns to the experiences of Punjabi immigrants to California as inspiration for her 1997 collection of poems, *Leaving Yuba City*, poetically rendering the hardships these immigrants faced as they worked land they could not own due to Alien Land Laws, and missed wives who could not join them due to immigration restrictions.

During this early-twentieth-century period there was also an adjacent diaspora of South Asian students and nationalists to the United States, many of whom wrote notable works. Writers such as Dhan Gopal Mukerji, Krishnalal Shridharani, and Dalip Singh Saund all wrote autobiographies (Mukerji's *Caste and Outcaste* was published in 1928, Krishnalal's *My India, My America* was published in 1941, and Saund's *Congressman from India* was published in 1961), and to varying degrees shared an investment in promoting and explaining Indian nationalism to U.S. audiences. This investment in the autobiographical form reveals a particular subject position as both cultural interpreter and outsider, responding at once to racial politics within the United States and speaking to the concerns of Indian nationalism. Another mid-twentieth-century writer who served as a leading translator of India for the U.S. public is Santha Rama Rau, whose first major work *Home to India* was published in 1945, and whose autobiographies, novels, and travel writings span four decades.¹⁰ Similarly, Ved Mehta, who came to the United States at the age of fifteen to attend the Arkansas School for the Blind, was a staff writer for the *New Yorker* from 1961

to 1994, and, among other writings, has published eleven autobiographies that span the United States and India.

While these are important literary antecedents, the second wave of South Asian American immigration, beginning in the United States with the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (also known as the Hart-Celler Act) and in Canada with the reformation of immigration law in 1967, has brought South Asian American literature to its current prominence. In contrast to earlier migrations, because the provisions of the Hart-Celler Act favored professionals, scientists, and artists of “exceptional ability,” this diaspora initially consisted primarily of technical and professional workers.¹¹ The experiences of these diasporic South Asians began to be chronicled by writers in the 1980s, with an explosion of South Asian American literature (from both first- and second-generation writers) beginning in the 1990s. The visibility of this literature was increased by a series of awards won by South Asian American authors, beginning with Bharati Mukherjee’s 1988 National Book Critics Circle Award for her short story collection *The Middleman and Other Stories*. Other notable awards include, but are not limited to, Sri Lankan Canadian author Michael Ondaatje’s 1992 Man Booker Prize for his novel *The English Patient* and Sorab Homi Fracis’s 2001 Iowa Short Fiction Award for his collection of short stories *Ticket to Minto: Stories of India and America*. These awards made Ondaatje and Fracis the first Canadian and Asian American, respectively, to win these honors. In 2000 Jhumpa Lahiri won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction for her 1999 short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies*, and in 2007 Kiran Desai won both the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Man Booker Prize for her novel *The Inheritance of Loss*.¹² Other notable writers coming to prominence in the 1990s and 2000s include (in no particular order) Shyam Selvadurai, Rohinton Mistry, Vikram Chandra, Ginu Kamani, Meena Alexander, Chitra Divakaruni, Amitava Kumar, Shani Mootoo, Agha Shahid Ali, G. S. Sarat Chandra, Abraham Verghese, Indira Ganesan, Mohsin Hamid, and Kirin Narayan.

Alongside the prominence brought to South Asian American literature by these authors were a series of groundbreaking anthologies published in the 1990s and 2000s, including *Our Feet Walk the Sky: Women of the South Asian Diaspora* (1993), *A Lotus of Another Color: An Unfolding of the South Asian Gay and Lesbian Experience* (1993), and *Contours of the Heart: South Asians Map North America* (1996 winner of the Before Columbus Foundation American Book Award). More recent collections include *Story-Wallah: Short Fiction from South Asian Writers* (2005) and *Indivisible: An Anthology of Contemporary South Asian American Poetry* (2010). These important anthologies not only brought

visibility to South Asian American literature in general, they also showcased the work of scholars in postcolonial studies, and in the burgeoning field of South Asian American studies. Moreover, many of the collections brought a feminist attention to the workings of gender and sexuality in the diaspora, as indicated by the number of anthologies focusing exclusively on South Asian American women's writings.

While it is impossible to generalize about such a capacious and varied body of literature, one commonality that many of these texts share is that they draw the reader's imagination to the imbrication of the domestic and the global as it is daily lived on North American soil. South Asian American texts thereby remind readers, as Agha Shahid Ali does in an oft-quoted poem, that "India always exists off the turnpikes of America."¹³ Accordingly, Rajini Srikanth persuasively argues in her 2004 study of South Asian American literature, *The World Next Door: South Asian American Literature and the Idea of America*, that "South Asian American writers' not insignificant contribution to American literature and to the American imagination is the delineation of narratives and spaces that enable the conception of a nation as simultaneously discrete and entwined within the fold of other nations."¹⁴ That is, in their attention to the global, South Asian American texts do not simply represent the sites of the North American diaspora as ones of hybridized possibility; they also show the very real bounded nature of the state, and of state power (particularly U.S. state power, on which I will primarily focus for the remainder of this chapter). If Asian American literature in general expands the imagination of American literature to consider both histories of exclusion and of U.S. imperial adventures abroad, South Asian American literature requires a slightly different imagining, one that calls readers to the triangulation of U.S. and British empires, to developmental projects of a neocolonial U.S. state, and to more recent processes of neoliberalization. On the one hand, thinking about post-1965 South Asian immigration in terms of privileged migrations tells a story that can be comfortably accommodated within the framework of a benevolent U.S. multicultural state opening its doors to the world and spawning a new "model minority." On the other hand, turning to the Cold War roots of the Hart-Celler Act and reading South Asian diaspora within longer histories of Cold War containment and U.S.-led developmentalism tells a very different story about the recruitment of South Asian labor to the United States and about trajectories of U.S. involvement in the subcontinent. As the editors of *The Sun Never Sets: South Asian Migrants in an Age of U.S. Power* remind us, we must be attentive to the recent shifts in South Asian diaspora accompanying neoliberal globalization, understanding "the decline of territorially based

colonization and the rise of neoliberalism not as two separate and unrelated events but as continuous with one another.”¹⁵ Therefore, even if the presence of people of South Asian descent in the United States cannot be explained through the logic of “we are here because you were there,” what South Asian literature does illuminate is how U.S. power operates in the latter half of the “American century” and beyond.

Rethinking Imperial Connections and Institutional Histories

In her influential 1995 essay “Is the United States Postcolonial?,” Jenny Sharpe argues against a conflation of postcolonial and Asian American studies, asserting that histories of postcolonial migrations to former imperial sites (as in British postwar recruitment of labor from South Asia and the West Indies) ought to be distinguished from histories of South Asian migration to the United States.¹⁶ Accordingly, Sharpe argues, “diasporic South Asian intellectuals who demand representation within Asian American studies abandon issues of postcoloniality in favor of multiculturalism.”¹⁷ Flattening out the differences between the two, she suggests, ignores the divergent processes of racialization of heterogeneous demographic groups within the United States, and threatens to elide histories of racial oppression. In other words, Sharpe glosses Rushdie’s assertion that South Asians in Great Britain are the “New Empire within Britain” to suggest that in the United States the empire is constituted otherwise.¹⁸

Sharpe’s call for specificity is well taken, and certainly the lure and danger of multiculturalism is precisely in the way it becomes a homogenizing celebration of culture divorced from histories of power. However, this formulation does not do justice to the longer histories of connection and disconnection (imperial and otherwise) between the United States and South Asia. In the pre-independence period, the United States was both aligned with, and competing against, the British Empire.¹⁹ The U.S. government officially supported British imperialism, even though many prominent Americans opposed it.²⁰ At the same time, the United States was contending for Indian markets by asserting itself against Britain as the proper modernizing power, often through public health programs (many under the aegis of the Rockefeller Foundation) that arguably laid the groundwork in the preindependence period for the developmental relationship between the regions to come.²¹ Indeed, in the postwar period developmental aid and assistance defined the relationship between the United States and South Asia, with the United States turning to development

for its promise to transform societies from traditional to modern, and in doing so contain communism by promoting democracy. Development in this guise was conceived of as both direct aid and the transfer of technical knowledge from the developed to the underdeveloped world. This latter goal corresponded with Jawaharlal Nehru's mission to create a new generation of Indian scientists through the expansion of technical institutes in India, ultimately creating the pool of talent for the "brain drain" to North America post-1965.²²

But developmental aid to India was merely part of a two-pronged attack, which included a military alliance with Pakistan to counter the threat of Indian nonalignment.²³ India, under Nehru's leadership, was not only a major player in the Afro-Asian Bandung Conference of newly independent states, but Nehru was one of the architects of the policy of nonalignment. Although the Non-Aligned Movement in Nehru's conception was just that, the United States took a very hostile view of nonalignment – and, for that matter, Bandung.²⁴ Indeed, the Hart-Celler act, as Vijay Prashad explains in his *The Karma of Brown Folk*, was intended to draw the "best and the brightest" from the rest of the world to give the United States the leading edge in Cold War space and weapons races. This Cold War logic also explains U.S. provision of money and weapons to proxies fighting the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, proxies (namely the Taliban and Al Qaeda) that are now the targets of U.S. military interventions in the region.

Despite the initial promise of modernization and development to change the world, by the 1970s Keynesian economics and state-led developmental planning began to be replaced by a neoliberal faith in free markets, following the theories of economist Milton Friedman. In South Asia, this was marked by the liberalization of national economies in the 1980s and 1990s, with the resultant privatization of industries and the opening up of markets to foreign investment.²⁵ Not only have these processes deepened class divides within South Asia, they have also created new circuits between North America and South Asia, as India has become a major site for U.S. investment and for the outsourcing of labor. This, in combination with North American shifts from a manufacturing to a service economy, has diversified patterns of South Asian migration to North America. Instead of being largely a privileged migration, many recent South Asian migrants come to perform less secure forms of service labor.²⁶ To turn to two literary examples, the experiences of the privileged migrants illuminated by Jhumpa Lahiri's work exist side by side with the experiences of illegal migrants to the United States, such as Biju in Kiran Desai's 2005 *Inheritance of Loss*. Biju's experiences as an undocumented worker moving through

an underworld of restaurant jobs in New York City are vastly different from those of the well-educated professionals that inhabit Lahiri's novels and short stories. Nonetheless, both of these examples speak not only to the economic processes at work within and between the global North and South, but also to the affective dimensions of a neoliberal moment in which the logic of the marketplace governs all aspects of life.²⁷

In charting this history of U.S. and South Asian connections I am following Bakirathi Mani's suggestion in her *Aspiring to Home: South Asians in America* that to talk about South Asian diasporics as postcolonial at once references the relationship to Great Britain as a former imperial power, and is a "structure of feeling" that defines South Asian immigrants' lived experiences in North America.²⁸ To think about the relationship between South Asia and America in this frame, moreover, is to get away from an understanding of postcoloniality that is narrowly confined to territorial occupation and draws instead a genealogy between U.S. technologies of empire in its colonies (the Philippines, Puerto Rico, etc.) and its neoimperial and neocolonial relationships that have intensified in the post-9/11 world and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.²⁹ Furthermore, by stressing these imperial connections, I join many scholars in American and Asian American studies who, since the early 1990s, have been concerned with permutations of U.S. power at home and abroad. This so-called transnational turn was marked in American studies by collections such as Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease's 1993 *The Cultures of United States Imperialism*, Amrijit Singh and Peter Schmidt's 2000 *Postcolonial Theory and the United States*, and Richard King's 2000 *Postcolonial America*. In ethnic studies, the move to transnational approaches was in part a response to the critique that (as Inderpal Grewal argues in an early essay on the topic) ethnic studies "concerns itself with racism at a local/national but not global level."³⁰ A focus on the imbrication of the domestic and the global within Asian American studies was dictated both by the increasing heterogeneity of Asian American groups, and by a series of metacritical Asian Americanist works focused on the diversity of Asian America. Lisa Lowe's important "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity" set the terms of these debates by proposing that rather than thinking of Asian American identity as vertically constituted through generations (i.e., as passed down and unchanging), it is instead horizontally produced through various kinds of cultural productions that must, moreover, be read in their global as well as domestic contexts.³¹ More recently, Kandice Chuh has argued for postcolonial approaches within Asian American studies for their questioning not only of U.S. imperialism but also of the attachment to the nation that resides within Asian American studies.³²

In the midst of these larger debates, South Asian Americanists marry insights from postcolonial theory to critiques of U.S. empire in order to theorize the somewhat anomalous position of South Asian Americans within Asian American studies. If South Asians (both located on the subcontinent and in the diaspora) have arguably been at the center of postcolonial studies, until somewhat recently they have been at the margins of Asian American studies. Excluded from the definition of Asian American by Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong in their groundbreaking 1974 anthology, *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*, South Asian Americans have been “a part, yet apart” of Asian American studies, as the influential 1998 critical anthology edited by Lavina Dhingra Shankar and Rajini Srikanth eloquently puts it. In their introduction Shankar and Srikanth suggest that the issue at stake is both correcting an absence and invisibility (why have South Asian Americans remained “apart” from an Asian America more narrowly conceived in East Asian terms?) and also asking how the inclusion of South Asian Americans fundamentally changes the landscape of Asian America.³³

The question of whether or not we should view South Asian America in terms of a postcolonial or ethnic studies frame concerns the relationship between the local and the global: the postcolonial looks to workings of power among nations while ethnic studies focuses on racialization within the U.S. state. As Srikanth parses in *The World Next Door*, ethnic studies scholars argue that the reality of U.S. state power as experienced by ethnic subjects within the United States is obscured in a global, postcolonial frame, and postcolonial studies scholars argue that ethnic studies is parochial. But Srikanth’s important point is that this is a false binary. To separate these, she suggests “not only will people be insufficiently apprised of the position of their country in the world of geopolitics (and that is ignorance that the people of the United States cannot afford given the nation’s long reach in world affairs), but they also will be unable to comprehend the many forces that bear upon domestic policy.”³⁴ Resonating with this point, and reflecting the fact that South Asian diasporic literature in the Americas is one of the most cohesive hemispherically oriented diasporic literatures (and cultures) within Asian American studies, most of the work being done in South Asian American studies has by necessity utilized a transnational frame.³⁵ In doing so, much of South Asian Americanist critique engages what Inderpal Grewal calls “transnational connectivities” wherein “subjects, technologies, and ethical practices [are] created through transnational networks and connections of many different types and within which the ‘global’ and the ‘universal’ [are] created as linked and

dominant concepts.”³⁶ Tracing through these connectivities thus reveals a landscape of South Asian America that not only complicates the relationship between the nation of origin and residence, but also connects the many nodes of the South Asian diaspora.

Postcolonial or Asian American? The Case of Jhumpa Lahiri and *The Lowland*

The creative work of South Asian American literature’s most prominent author Jhumpa Lahiri offers a barometer of the evolving perceptions of South Asian American literature. Her works in many ways encapsulate the turns in the field from “diasporic” in *Interpreter of Maladies* to “Asian American” in *The Namesake* and then to “American” in *Unaccustomed Earth* (as signaled by the revealing Hawthorne epigraph from which the title is taken).³⁷ If so, her 2013 novel *The Lowland* is hard to characterize cleanly. For one, its direct engagement with the revolutionary Naxalite movement in West Bengal (a Maoist peasant movement that began in 1967) is somewhat of a departure from her earlier work in which the political is peripheral (and, arguably, missing entirely in *Unaccustomed Earth*).³⁸ The “lowland” that gives the novel its title resonates throughout, even if much of the primary action takes place in a Rhode Island town. As these double locations indicate, a postcolonial and Asian Americanist frame are equally necessary to read the novel, as it is as much embedded within the revolutionary subcontinental context as it is a tale of immigration. What is more interesting, however, is that the two strands cannot be fully separated, thus insisting that the postcolonial is always already within the South Asian American.

The novel opens with the introduction of two brothers: Subhash and Udayan. Born fifteen months apart, inseparable to the point of almost being interchangeable (“one was perpetually confused with the other,” we are told), they are nonetheless opposite in temperament.³⁹ Udayan is bold where his brother Subhash is retiring, and this crucial difference drives them to their different fates – Subhash goes to the United States to pursue an advanced degree, while Udayan stays in Calcutta to immerse himself in the Naxalite movement and marry Gauri (the sister of a fellow Naxalite and one of the novel’s central figures). Located at the end of the first section of the novel, Udayan’s murder by the police in the lowlands near his parent’s house propels the novel forward, haunting it with his revolutionary (and futile) presence. Indeed, the novel ends not in the present tense but backward in time at the moment of Udayan’s death, showing his final thoughts before he is shot. The

closing moments of the novel are Udayan's memories of his first date with Gauri, and are figured in terms of unfulfilled expectation. Udayan "[strains] to hear what she was saying" but is met with "only silence" (340). No message is communicated to him, or to the reader; we are instead left with a moment of foreclosed possibility. Thus even as Udayan's death bookends the novel, showing it as the framing context of all that is contained within, the ending suggests that this context is incomplete.

Although Udayan's structuring presence undergirds the novel, the majority of it takes place in the United States, following Subhash's immigrant narrative. Udayan's presence asserts itself nevertheless through his letters to Subhash, through Gauri (whom Subhash marries to release her from being a widow in his parents' home), and through his daughter Bela (who Subhash raises as his own).⁴⁰ All of these attest to Udayan's continuing legacy, bringing revolutionary subcontinental politics into the United States. And yet, in some ways *The Lowland* represents a danger in separating the postcolonial context from the Asian American one, as the United States is precisely where revolutionary politics become defanged. What, after all, is this narrative if not one of the twinned self that leaves revolutionary desires behind in a literal swamp (i.e., the lowland) of activism and failed nationalism in exchange for life in the United States? Throughout, Udayan as the masculinist and revolutionary "Third World" subject is contrasted to bourgeois and feminized Subhash who lives out a quiet academic life in Rhode Island. As Gauri notes when Subhash comes to pick her up at the airport upon her arrival to the United States, he is "a milder version" of Udayan, "his face . . . like the slightly flawed impression the man at Immigration had just stamped into her passport" (123). The passport metaphor suggests that the process of immigration is an imperfect translation.⁴¹ Furthermore, in contrast to India the United States is represented as a site in which political activism is a youthful rite of passage but is not a matter of life or death. Udayan is explicitly compared to Subhash's roommate, Richard, who protests against the Vietnam War. But where Udayan meets an untimely and violent end, Richard dies in advanced middle age when a blood clot travels to his heart after a long bike ride.

This brief reading of *The Lowland* reveals the inseparability of the postcolonial and the Asian American, and it alerts us to a danger of the postcolonial being domesticated within the Asian American. While it is possible to read Subhash as a typical figure of post-1965 migration to the United States, this is only half of the picture. Subhash may come to the United States for his PhD and (as Lahiri is so skilled at portraying) much of the novel explores his

adaptation to the United States. But the revolutionary subtext shows the other side of the seemingly typical and privileged migration: Subhash leaves in part because of Udayan's political involvement in the Naxalite movement, and in this the novel shows us that migrations to the United States are intimately tied to political movements on the subcontinent. On one level the novel invites the reader to create some binaries: Indian nationalism as corrupt and ineffective and thus giving rise to a (equally ineffective) Maoist insurgency; the United States as the site of personal fulfillment giving rise to merely domestic tragedies such as broken families (Gauri leaves Subhash and Bela). But if we push this further, if we successfully follow through these various connections, we can reject such binaries through a South Asian Americanist reading practice that remains attentive to the symbiotic workings of the postcolonial and the Asian American, insisting that these histories cannot be parsed out but are intimately connected, and haunt both India and the United States, as the ending of the novel suggests.

Returning to Rushdie, if we read Lahiri as one of the authors creating "the true Indian literature of the first postcolonial half century . . . in the language the British left behind," that literature is – contra the nationalist claims contained in the phrase "true Indian literature" – a specifically diasporic literature that questions and attests to the power of the nation. This then reflects at once on Indian nationalism and on the U.S. nationalism of which South Asian Americans are a part. In other words, the connections that *The Lowland* charts complicate Rushdie's claims by revealing a South Asian Americanist landscape that, in place of his premillennial exuberance, is a much more measured, and therefore useful, plotting of the world and of our place in it.

Notes

- 1 Salman Rushdie, "Damme, This Is the Oriental Scene for You," *New Yorker* (June 23, 1997): 50.
- 2 See Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991* (New York: Penguin, 1992).
- 3 See the discussion of Rushdie's essay in Sandhya Shukla, *India Abroad: Diasporic Cultures of Postwar America and England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 133.
- 4 Clarke Blaise, "A Novel of India's Coming of Age," *New York Times Book Review* (April 19, 1981): 19.
- 5 Salman Rushdie, *Joseph Anton: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 2012), 72. See [the] discussion of these two novels in Stephen Clingman, *The Grammar of Identity: Transnational Fiction and the Nature of the Boundary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- 6 Susan Koshy and R. Radhakrishnan, eds., *Transnational South Asians: The Making of a Neo-Diaspora* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 19.

- 7 Bakirathi Mani, *Aspiring to Home: South Asians in America* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012). See also Joan Jensen, *Passage from India: Asian Indian Immigrants in North America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988).
- 8 The newspaper of the Ghadar Party regularly featured poetry and songs, some of which are collected in *Blood into Ink: South Asian and Middle Eastern Women Write War*, ed. Miriam Cooke and Roshni Rustomji-Kerns (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994).
- 9 See Brinda J. Mehta, *Diasporic (Dis)locations: Indo-Caribbean Women Writers Negotiate the "Kala Pani"* (Kingston, Jamaica: The University of the West Indies Press, 2004).
- 10 See Antoinette Burton, *The Postcolonial Careers of Santha Rama Rau* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
- 11 For the full text of the law see online resource: <http://library.uwb.edu/guides/usimmigration/79%20stat%20911.pdf>. Also see Vijay Prashad, *Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).
- 12 In addition, the memoir Abraham Verghese, *My Own Country: A Doctor's Story of a Town and Its People in the Age of AIDS* (New York: Vintage, 1994) was chosen as a *New York Times* notable book in 1994; Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni won The Allen Ginsberg Poetry Prize and the Pushcart Prize for her collection of poetry *Leaving Yuba City: New and Selected Poems* (New York: Anchor Books, 1997); and Akhil Sharma won the 2001 Hemingway Foundation/Pen Award for his novel, *An Obedient Father* (New York: Harvest, 2000).
- 13 Agha Shahid Ali, "In Search of Evanescence," in *A Nostalgist's Map of America* (New York: Norton, 1991), 41.
- 14 Rajini Srikanth, *The World Next Door: South Asian American Literature and the Idea of America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 10–11.
- 15 Vivek Bald, Miabi Chatterjee, Sujani Reddy, and Manu Vimalassery, eds., *The Sun Never Sets: South Asian Migrants in an Age of U.S. Power* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 14.
- 16 See also Ruth Frankenberg and Lata Mani, "Crosscurrents, Crosstalk: Race, 'Postcoloniality' and the Politics of Location," *Cultural Studies* 7.2 (1992): 292–310. They assert that rather than "postcolonial" the United States should be considered "post civil rights."
- 17 Jenny Sharpe, "Is the United States Postcolonial? Transnationalism, Immigration, and Race," in *Postcolonial America*, ed. C. Richard King (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 117.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 118.
- 19 See Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
- 20 Alan Raucher, "American Anti-Imperialists and the Pro-India Movement, 1900–1932," *Pacific Historical Review* 43.1 (February 1974): 83–110.
- 21 See Sinha, *Specters of Mother India*; and see Sujani Reddy, "'The Hidden Hand': Remapping Indian Nurse Immigration to the United States," in Bald et al., *The Sun Never Sets*, 103–26.
- 22 See Prashad, *Karma of Brown Folks*, 75–6.
- 23 Michael Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution: Modernization, Development, and U.S. Foreign Policy from the Cold War to the Present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 69–70.

- 24 See Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New York: New Press, 2007), 31–50.
- 25 See Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution*, 175–82.
- 26 See Miabi Chatterjee, "Putting 'the Family' to Work: Managerial Discourses of Control in the Immigrant Service Sector," in Bald, et al., *The Sun Never Sets*, 127–56; and see Monisha Das Gupta, *Unruly Immigrants: Rights, Activism, and Transnational South Asian Politics in the United States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
- 27 For more on the neoliberal turn see Wendy Brown, "Neoliberalism and the End of Democracy," *Theory and Event* 7.1 (2003); David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006). For a discussion of neoliberalism in Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*, see Susan Koshy, "Neoliberal Family Matters," *American Literary History* 25.2 (2013): 344–80.
- 28 Mani, *Aspiring to Home*, 52.
- 29 See Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007) and Junaid Rana, *Terrifying Muslims: Race and Labor in the South Asian Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
- 30 Inderpal Grewal, "The Postcolonial, Ethnic Studies and the Diaspora," *Socialist Review* 24.4 (Fall 1994): 46.
- 31 Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996). See Sau-ling Wong's critique of the transnational turn in "Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads," *Amerasia Journal* 21.1 (1995): 1–27.
- 32 Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).
- 33 Other important early works include Deepika Bahri and Mary Vasudeva, *Between the Lines: South Asians and Postcoloniality* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996); Shilpa Dave et al., "De-Privileging Positions: Indian Americans, South Asian Americans, and the Politics of Asian American Studies," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 3.1 (February 2000): 67–100; Lavina Dhingra Shankar and Rajini Srikanth, "South Asian American Literature: 'Off the Turnpike' of Asian America," in *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity, and Literature*, ed. Amrijit Singh and Peter Schmidt (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2000), 37–87.
- 34 Srikanth, *The World Next Door*, 43.
- 35 Even a study such as Anupama Jain, *How to Be South Asian in America: Narratives of Ambivalence and Belonging* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), which takes as its theme narratives of assimilation, theorizes them transnationally. Other transnationally inflected work includes Anita Mannur, *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), and Sandhya Shukla, *India Abroad: Diasporic Cultures of Postwar America and England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).
- 36 Inderpal Grewal, *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).
- 37 See Lavina Dhingra and Floyd Cheung, eds., *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012).

- 38 See Rajini Srikanth, "What Lies Beneath: Lahiri's Brand of Desirable Difference in *Unaccustomed Earth*," in *ibid.*, 51–72.
- 39 Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Lowland* (New York: Knopf, 2013), 11. All further references cited parenthetically in the text.
- 40 The rather troubling feminist implications of Gauri as requiring rescue from patriarchal traditions in India and also the portrayal of her as an unnatural mother who abandons Bela and Subhash to pursue an academic career are worth exploring in greater detail.
- 41 See Amitava Kumar, *Passport Photos* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

Contemporary Filipino American Writers and the Legacy of Imperialism

ELEANOR TY

More than one hundred years have passed since the Philippine Declaration of Independence on June 12, 1898, when Filipino revolutionary forces under General Emilio Aguinaldo proclaimed sovereignty from three centuries of Spanish colonial rule. Still, the vestiges of Spanish, U.S., and, to a lesser extent, Japanese imperialism are evident in the lives of Filipinos in the Philippines and in the diaspora. The surnames of many Filipinos reveal Spanish heritage, such as Gonzales, Hernandez, de los Santos, and Bautista. Moreover, popular first names such as Maria, Pilar, Juan, and Jesus; places like Las Piñas, Los Baños, and Laguna; festivals such as the Santo Niño, the Santa Cruzan, and the Roman Catholic pasyon; common foods such as empanadas, leche flan, and mantequilla; and items of clothing such as pantalon, kamiseta, and so forth are all Spanish in origin.

The legacy of the United States colonial period (1898–1942) is also evident at many levels, including the country's system of democratic government, the electoral system, military bases, GI Joes, and jeepneys; culinary traits, such as the use of Spam, ketchup, and Carnation milk in typical "Filipino" foods; the ubiquity of Hollywood films, American pop music, and Broadway musicals, as well as the use of English as an official language. Epifanio San Juan Jr. has talked about the way the United States used a "dual policy of force and persuasion" to "attain its imperialist objective" when it annexed the Philippines at the turn of the century, and how the "public schools and the town administration were the primary ideological state apparatuses during the first two decades of pacification."¹ But one does not have to be an academic or postcolonial Marxist critic to see the coercive and consensual effects of American imperialism and colonialism in the daily lives of Filipinos years after the country's independence.

In an early essay about Filipino American literature, Oscar Campomanes notes the unique situation of the Philippines because it was the only Asian country to have been "drawn into a truly colonial and neo-colonial relation

with the United States” but whose colonial history has been forgotten by Americans.² Unlike other Asian American literature, Campomanes remarked that many Filipino American works are more concerned about the situation in the Philippines than about the writers’ growing up experiences in the United States.³ Identity for Filipino American writers “condenses itself in the institution of creative genealogies, mythic reinterpretations of colonial history and reevaluations of the linguistic and cultural losses caused by colonialism.”⁴ Until recently, Campomanes’s term “literature of exile,” which he used to describe the works of politically expatriated first- and second-generation “Flips,” remained a defining term for Filipino American writing. Filipinos were an underrepresented and “invisible” ethnic group and have not “claimed” America in the same way that Chinese Americans have. The Philippines has been forgotten in American history because, as Campomanes writes, the annexation of the Philippines by the United States has been “problematic for American political and civil society” since “around the turn of the century and thereafter.”⁵ In the 1960s and early 1970s, another kind of invisibility occurred: there were still not as many Filipinos in the United States as there were Chinese or Japanese, and the reality of these numbers created a different kind of liminality for Filipino Americans within Asian American groups. Sarita See observes that, “Filipino America is strangely and structurally invisible, and its position at the crossroads of race and empire has everything to do with that invisibility.”⁶ The “invisibility” of Filipino Americans is slowly changing. After the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act introduced family reunification and occupational preferences, Filipinos have migrated to the United States in great numbers. According to the U.S. census, in 2009, Filipinos (3.2 million) are now the second-largest Asian group in the United States, after Chinese Americans. Instead of remaining exilic and invisible, there are now thriving Filipino diasporic communities in the United States and around the world, with members who have desires (in varying degrees) to maintain a collective identity and who share feelings of nostalgia and loyalty to the homeland.

Focusing mainly on prose fiction produced by Filipinos/as in the last two decades, this chapter examines important developments in Filipino American literature since the “pioneer” Filipino American writers best exemplified by N.V.M. Gonzalez, Carlos Bulosan, José García Villa, and Bienvenido Santos. The works produced recently reveal an affective and complex relationship with Spain, America, and the Philippines, betraying at once a nostalgia for the Filipino homeland, people, and traditions, and a desire to distance oneself from that originary culture because of the poverty, disappointment, and, especially for those who grew up during the 1970s and 1980s, the abuses of the

Marcos regime. The characters in these novels look to their colonial “masters,” especially America, both as a source of inspiration and economic hope at the same time as they become angry or disenchanted when they find themselves relegated to the margins of those nations. The novels deal with the ongoing political, economic, and cultural legacy of war and imperialism, and can be roughly divided into four different types: those concerned with the recovery of Filipino history and collective memory; those that attempt to contest (neo)colonialism through postmodern aesthetics; those that represent growing up in a new, globalized, and transnational world; and those that deal with issues caused by the events of 9/11. Although not all works fall easily into just one of these four categories, this taxonomy is a useful way of understanding the broader picture and recent developments in contemporary Filipino American fiction.

Recovery of History and Collective Memory

In Filipino American novels published between the 1990s and the early twenty-first century, there is a concerted effort to make visible the diverse experiences (regional, class, gender, sexual orientation) and lives of Filipinos in America and in the Philippines, to retrieve previously unrecorded history, and to explore the long-term consequences of encounters between the Spaniards and Filipinos, Americans and Filipinos, Japanese and Filipinos, and the entanglements between them. As Rocío Davis notes, “A sense of discontinuous history and cultural hybridization produced by a palimpsestic journey of imperialism, cultural imposition, diasporic movement, and assimilation obliges writers to work within a heterogeneous overlapping of cultures with their attendant myths, religious and ethical philosophies, aesthetic ideologies, narrative forms, political systems, and economic modes.”⁷ In many of these “contemporary” novels, the recovery of personal and collective memories becomes a key element in the narrative. Cecilia Manguerra Brainard’s *When the Rainbow Goddess Wept*, parts of Peter Bacho’s *Cebu*, and Tess Uriza Holthe’s *When the Elephants Dance* are similarly set during the Japanese occupation of the Philippines during World War II (1941–5). Both Brainard and Holthe grew up hearing their fathers’ stories about the cruelty of Japanese soldiers during the war; the famine, death, and destruction that ensued from the struggle to control the Philippines among the Japanese; the U.S. army and navy, which were ordered to abandon the country in 1942; and the Filipino underground guerrillas. Bacho’s *Cebu* is also about the consequences of imperialism and the tragedy that ensues from the failure to reconcile competing claims of

colonial and indigenous values. As Elizabeth Pisares notes, *Cebu* is a “disrupted bildungsroman,” in which the protagonist Ben Lucero aligns himself “with Spanish and US colonial discourses represented by respectively, celibacy and historical amnesia,” and which do not allow him to fully develop as a Filipino American subject.⁸

Brainard’s novel is set in the fictional city of Ubec (Brainard’s hometown Cebu spelled backward) and is narrated from the point of view of Yvonne, who is nine years old when the Japanese bomb Clark Air Base and proceed to occupy the Philippines. Yvonne’s memories of her youth before the war are “carefree and prelapsarian, while the war years are compared to a state of hellish limbo” in which guerrilleros fight to prevent Japanese soldiers from making further advances, women are raped, and men tortured.⁹ The most interesting parts of this otherwise realist novel are the Filipino folk tales, told by the storyteller Laydan, which are interspersed in the child’s narrative. These include, for example, the tale of the great hero Tuwaang, who sets off to rescue the Maiden of Monawon with the help of a rooster and a flute.¹⁰ These legends empower Yvonne, who takes over the role of the singer and storyteller after the war and is able to envision the survival of the devastated Ubec city.

Holthe’s *When the Elephants Dance* is presented from the point of view of three narrators: thirteen-year-old Alejandro Karangalan, his rebellious older sister Isabelle (who is seventeen), and Domingo Matapang, a guerrilla commander whose name means “brave.” The novel opens in February 1945 when the U.S. army had returned and was fighting the Japanese. Alejandro has to walk twenty kilometers, ducking to avoid gunfire, to work as a houseboy for Filipino families who collaborate with the Japanese. He is paid in cigarettes, which he then barter for food for his family. At one point, when he is sent out to get medicine for his ailing father, he is captured and tortured by the Japanese. In Isabelle’s narrative, we meet a local boy who loves her but who is collaborating with the Japanese. He tries but is unable to save her from rape when she is taken by the soldiers. Holthe presents these incidents alongside other graphic and horrific scenes, describing fights between guerrillas and Japanese soldiers that leave hundreds of dead bodies of men, women, and children rotting on the streets, as well as the division between those Filipinos who supported the Japanese and those who resisted. However, within these three first-person narratives, Holthe also inserts other voices and stories. A group of Filipino families and friends, likened to “chickens” caught between the two fighting “elephants” (the Americans and Japanese), hide in a cellar of a house, share a limited supply of food and water, and pass the time by telling stories to each other.¹¹ This device, following Boccaccio’s *Decameron* and Chaucer’s

Canterbury Tales, allows Holthe to juxtapose the tension, anxiety, and violence of the present moment of siege with stories from the period of Spanish colonization, with Filipino tales that incorporate supernatural elements, and with other short moral tales that reveal not only Holthe's storytelling abilities but the richness of Filipino indigenous culture.

One of the stories, "A Cure for Happiness," told by Alejandro's father, involves Esmeralda Cortez, the town beauty of the village of Blanca Negros, who was adored by Alejandro's father when he was a child. He watched her dispense magical potions and medicines for people who wished to have less jealous wives, regain their sexual appetite, or even be less happy. Esmeralda falls in love but is jilted by her handsome lover for a rich town woman, and at their wedding she appears and is swallowed up by an earthquake, which also causes the church to sink ominously into the ground. Another fascinating story, "Ghost Children," involves a set of twin girls, one of whom dies on her seventh birthday. The mother, grief stricken, adopts an orphan girl named Corazón of the same age, who everyone believes is an angel but who is hated by the remaining twin, Ana. Ana tries repeatedly to sabotage Corazón's life, ruins her clothes, toys, and friends as they grow up. She even marries the boy Corazón favors, but learns upon Corazón's deathbed that she was a "worthy sister" who only wanted to be loved.¹² Ana is then haunted by Corazón's ghost until she forgives her. These and other marvelous stories trouble the bleak realism of the war story, and reveal a layer of indigenous belief systems that have been dispossessed by Christianity and Western Enlightenment rationalism.

In an article about magical realism and postcolonial literature, Stephen Slemon writes that, "The imaginative reconstruction in post-colonial cultures requires the recuperation of lost voices and discarded fragments, those elements pushed to the margins of consciousness by imperialism's centralizing cognitive structures."¹³ By introducing women healers, animal charmers, *aswang* (vampire-like shape shifters), and a moral system of rewards and retribution that is beyond the rational and scientific that still plays an active role in the lives of Filipinos, especially in rural areas, these authors foreground the world that has been lost through Spanish and U.S. imperialism and the wars. What appear as elements of the fantastic and the magic realist are now underground, narrated in a cellar, repressed by the fixed structures of Catholicism, the Japanese and U.S. army, schools, and other administrative institutions. Yet these legends and beliefs were part of the landscape and culture of the Philippines, and offer a way of seeing and reading the world that runs counter to the discourse of empiricism. The folk stories, legends, and memories of the guerrilla resistance to the Japanese during World War II add to the cultural

memory of the Philippines, which, in turn, adds significant dimensions to the cultural identity of diasporic Filipino subjects.

Postmodern Contestations of Colonialism

Using a complex temporal and narrative structure, Jessica Hagedorn links the discovery and conquest of the Philippines by the Spaniards with American neocolonial cultural imperialism in her third novel, *Dream Jungle*. In a similar fashion to her highly acclaimed *Dogeaters*, *Dream Jungle* captures a cacophony of voices – politicians, the ultra rich, mestizos, actors, servants, a journalist, a film crew member, the abject poor, and dispossessed. It also includes extracts from historical documents. The novel links together two seemingly unrelated incidents of the 1970s: the purported discovery of a Stone Age “lost tribe” in the southern islands and the filming of an epic Vietnam movie, *Napalm Sunset*. What Rachel Lee says about *Dogeaters* applies equally well to *Dream Jungle*: postmodern fragmentation “is not merely the sign of Hagedorn’s ‘virtuoso’ writing skill, but an expressive tool through which the author contests absolute truths and narratives of progress.”¹⁴ Lee notes that Hagedorn “continually highlights the subjective viewpoint from which one observes an event, constantly switching perspectives and, in doing so, suggesting that social relations also inhere in who looks, who writes, who represents—determinations that are plural rather than singular.”¹⁵

Dream Jungle begins with an excerpt from Antonio Pigafetta’s account of Magellan’s expedition, in which he describes the “goodlooking and delicately formed” naked native women,¹⁶ followed by an account of mestizo politician Zamora López de Legazpi’s discovery, in the 1970s, of the “beautiful, powerful, strange” forest and cave dwellers, the “*taobo*” (*tao* = people) (5). Implicitly, the comparison reveals the colonialist wish to be founder/father/ruler of a race of noble savages in the sixteenth and twentieth centuries. Both Zamora and the American actor Vince Moody desire Rizalina, the cook’s daughter who is smart and likes to read. But instead of depicting her as unwitting victim, Hagedorn explores the complexity and complicity of the colonized subject. Living as a child servant in Zamora’s household, twelve-year-old Rizalina is allowed to borrow books from the master’s library. Significantly, it is she who enters the library late one night and encounters Zamora and, even though she knows she should leave, Rizalina “reached out and placed her hand on his bristly cheek” (117). She wonders, “This longing she felt, this aching, inexplicable confusion whenever Mister Zamora was near—was it love?” (117). Rizalina flees the household before any seduction takes place, but with iconic names like

Legazpi (after the conquistador Miguel López de Legazpi) and Rizalina (after Philippine national hero Jose Rizal), Hagedorn reveals the complex entanglement of subjection, the childlike awe, attraction, and repulsion that characterizes colonial relationships. Significantly, it is with the promise and gift of knowledge that Zamora is able to attract and converse with Rizalina, not by force.

Hagedorn, however, “has no taste for obvious villains,” as one reviewer notes.¹⁷ The novel is, like the film within the novel *Napalm Sunset*, described as “funny in a fatalistic, ironic, Filipino kind of way. No clear-cut heroes or villains, no simplistic, black-and-white notions of justice. Just murk and mud” (175). Rizalina is not a heroine but a survivor. Having endured the beatings and the abuse of her father when she was young, she is inspired by the vintage Tagalog movies, “projected directly onto the cinder-block walls of the one-room schoolhouse” (79), where her favorite movie *The Enchanted Forest* features Darna, a super heroine who “flies above erupting volcanoes and raging rivers, over steamy jungles and modern cities” and lands “right on her feet” (79–80). When Vince Moody meets Rizalina, she is fifteen and has transformed herself into Jinx, an exotic dancer at the Love Connection. He falls in love with her, and she makes up her mind, after seeing visions of tigers around her, to take her destiny into her own hands; she leaves the jungle and ends up living and working in Santa Monica.

In his chapter about music in Hagedorn’s postmodernism, Martin Ponce asks, “how does the diasporic writer address the homeland, a homeland that is both brutal and beautiful? What is left . . . when the spectacular illusions of Hollywood cinema, the hallucinatory antics and evasions of the First Lady, the very real disappearances, rapes, murders, and decapitations make for an impossible postcolonial condition?”¹⁸ Ponce suggests that, for Hagedorn, the answer is to embrace the contradiction that is the Philippines. In *Dream Jungle*, absurdity and sense, dream and reality, become one. The nightmare that was Vietnam becomes real during the filming. Dead bodies are mistakenly sent to the director because he forgot to specify “props” when he ordered them (240). In the middle of shooting the movie (based on the filming of *Apocalypse Now*), the air force generals borrow the helicopters for a “little ‘bombing’ mission on the MNLF (Moro National Liberation Front) territory” (276). And although a professor of anthropology later denounces the tribe of *taobo* people as a “marvelous prank” and a money-laundering scam, Zamora, who discovered them, genuinely loved the boy Bodabil, whom he took from the tribe. To the end of his days, he claims that he derived fun, pleasure, and satisfaction from helping his tribes (319). In Hagedorn’s novel, what is genuine is called

into question. The Philippines becomes a simulacrum, in Baudrillard's sense, where it becomes impossible to distinguish the difference between illusion and reality, because the real no longer has a basis in reality.¹⁹ In *Dream Jungle*, the Philippines becomes an enactment of Hollywood fantasies, primitive passions, Orientalist projections, as dreams, visions, and nightmares intertwine with the historical, with actual events, and the physical.

Gina Apostol's *Gun Dealers' Daughter* is similarly set during the Marcos era, and offers readers the challenge of piecing together the traumatic events that lead up to the heroine Soledad's breakdown. At the beginning, we learn that although she has a brilliant mind as a child, she is suffering from "miserable dysgraphia, a slip-sliding dementia of letters, an almost untenable mental pit."²⁰ The motif of fragmentation, piecing, and processing of bodies and letters together becomes important as the novel progresses, and suggests the ways in which history and memory can be manipulated by the rich and those in power. Apostol encourages people to shape history for themselves, stating in an interview that "we were history" during the 1980s,²¹ when people staged a series of popular demonstrations in a campaign against a regime of violence and electoral fraud that culminated in 1986 with the People Power Revolution, which eventually led to the departure of President Ferdinand Marcos. Her upper-class heroine is attracted by the thrill of being part of a cause larger than herself during her university years and does not learn how deeply her friends, her family, the Filipino politicians around her, and even Americans are involved in her escapades until after her world explodes.

Growing Up Transnational

Another category or group of contemporary Filipino American novels explores the perils, pleasures, and problems of growing up in an increasingly transnational world. In *Assimilating Asians*, Patricia Chu points out that Asian Americans have to employ different strategies to write bildungsroman, because "the traditional bildungsroman socializes readers by inviting them to identify with protagonists as they strive to become good citizens of the nation, a task that requires them to relinquish their 'particularity and difference.'"²² Chu argues that the twentieth-century American novel emerged out of the sentimental and Victorian English novel, with a set of values that implicitly became woven into realist fiction. Qualities such as "frugality, diligence, Protestantism, postmarital monogamy, honesty, sincerity, modesty, forthrightness, compassion, and articulateness" became the approved and definitive qualities of the emerging middle class.²³ Similarly, using Max

Weber's discussion of the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism, Rey Chow traces capitalistic enterprises "as the outcome of a force of internal disciplining peculiar to the secularizing West."²⁴ In novels by Brian Roley, Han Ong, and Zamora Linmark, we find protagonists who are negotiating with the competing claims of good citizenship, capitalism, compulsory heterosexuality, at the same time as they are trying to find their ethnic identity during the period between teens and adulthood.

For second- and third-generation Filipino Americans who, unlike diasporic African Americans, have an originary homeland, the homeland is often mythologized as a place that is more moral and pure than America, its Catholicism seen as a way of controlling and disciplining excess. In Evelina Galang's short story "Her Wild American Self," the narrator describes her family's move to America with hope: "they brought with them a trunk full of ideas – land of opportunity, home of democracy, and equality," but also a measure of disapproval, "God forbid, we should ever be like those Americans – loose, loud-mouthed, disrespectful children."²⁵ Growing up Filipino American meant internalizing the qualities of secular capitalism – frugality, diligence, hard work – more firmly than nonethnic Americans. The homeland becomes a place of discipline, not necessarily that of nostalgia: "Do you want your father to send you to the Philippines? Maybe that would teach you how to behave," says her mother.²⁶ This pressure to assimilate into a nation of "good citizens" embracing the Protestant ethic is the cause of conflict in a number of narratives, including Brian Roley's *American Son* that, according to Martin Ponce, reveals the ways that "Filipino Americans are caught and constituted between the multiple forces of US racism, social respectability and upward mobility, and diasporic discipline."²⁷

As I have argued elsewhere, global American culture has had a negative impact on Filipino immigrants and their 1.5 generation children because it has contributed to the overvaluation of wealth, glamour, First World products, and material goods.²⁸ Hollywood films also create unattainable ideals of masculinity and beauty, which affect the way one perceives one's body and one's relationship with others.²⁹ As novels such as Brian Roley's *American Son* and Han Ong's *Fixer Chao* illustrate, many young Filipino Americans experience what Diane L. Wolf calls "emotional transnationalism which situates them between different generational and locational points of reference – their parents', sometimes also their grandparents', and their own – both real and imagined."³⁰ Children of the first-generation Filipino immigrants and Filipino Americans of the 1.5 generation are brought up "accepting patriarchal family dynamics and the predominance of parental wishes over children's voices,

resulting in internal struggles and an inability to approach parents openly for fear of sanctions.”³¹ Instead, they look for other ways to empower themselves and to become part of the nation that has invited them in and yet refuses to accord them the same recognition as white Americans.

In Roley’s *American Son*, two mestizo Filipino boys resort to crime and violence in order to be part of the society in West Los Angeles. The older brother Tomas, who dresses like a Mexican gangster, trains guard attack dogs to sell to celebrities. His mother, abandoned by her abusive American husband, barely makes ends meet working at two low-paying jobs. The younger brother Gabe, initially representing himself as the “son who is quiet and no trouble,”³² becomes increasingly embroiled in his brother’s world of interethnic gang clashes, petty thievery, and other criminal ways of making money. Instead of being ideal immigrants, the family is an example of “failed” assimilation: Tomas sells stolen goods, Gabe fails at school, and the mother feels “racial shame.”³³ Through the letters of her brother Uncle Betino sent from the Philippines, Ika the mother and the boys are subjected to what Ponce calls “diasporic discipline.”³⁴ By comparing his two daughters successfully earning their degrees from Ateneo and Harvard to the American sons’ bad behavior, Uncle Betino further reinforces the sense of failure the mother feels. Yet, she can no longer return to the homeland, because, as she says, she has “lived in the States longer than the Philippines” and is “American now” (33). In the novel, however, Ika is repeatedly humiliated in front of her sons. Employing a fallible young narrator who recounts events without judgment, Roley conveys the shame, frustration, and self-abnegation that occur for immigrants who are viewed as different. Gabe used to “wait down at the corner” rather than in front of his school because he “did not want people to see Mom” picking him up (174). He is embarrassed by her “bug-eyed sunglasses” (175), the “little Filipino woman” who looks like a “bedraggled little sparrow” (177) when compared to Ben Feinstein’s “yoga mom” who is “blond and tall and thin and wears black yoga-class tights” (175). To compensate for what Li refers to as “Asian abjection”³⁵ as well as racial “melancholia,” the “entangled network of repulsion and sympathy, fear and desire, repudiation and identification”³⁶ that the boys experience, they become tough, resorting to violence against each other and those weaker than them. Instead of embracing the values of “frugality, diligence, Protestantism, honesty,” the values of middle-class America, they are able to survive and become “American sons” only by replicating the kind of masculinity found in Hollywood action movies – that is, cowboy-like individualistic aggression and a wish for revenge with a view to the moral repair of a broken society.

Other growing-up narratives reflect the transnational and global nature of Filipino American literature. Bino Realuyo's haunting *The Umbrella Country*, although set entirely in the Philippines during the martial law years, nevertheless reverberates with U.S. neo-colonial references. In the novel, Gringo, Pipo, and their friends are fascinated with dressing up like the women in the *Miss Unibers* (Miss Universe) pageant, which was hosted by Bob Barker and Helen O'Connell and held in Manila in 1974. The novel, which ends with the immigration of the family to the United States, weaves together issues of domestic violence, poverty, gender identity, and the allure of the American dream. Ponce argues that "the novel is critical of the violence committed against queer boys and men and against women, and of the ways that martial law gives impetus and shape to that violence."³⁷ Nation and gender are linked in important ways. Daddy Groovie, who takes this name because it is a "Stateside name," is hypermasculine and proud of his "he-man" father who was like "GI Joe."³⁸ He leaves for America first, and Gringo reads letters from him describing the plenty in America: "pizza bigger than your two hands, extra cheese; steak, medium-rare; fish fillet."³⁹ In contrast, Gringo's mother "represents local Filipino culture and its resilient spirit" as she is the one member who refuses to leave the Philippines at the end of the novel.⁴⁰ Mommy Estrella, whom Daddy Groovie abuses, is depicted "as a Christ-like figure, associated frequently with fish, blood, rain, and patience" as she cooks or sews.⁴¹ The final scene, which features the children leaving for America, is bittersweet because they not only have to leave their homeland but also their long-suffering mother.

Another growing-up Filipino American story is R. Zamora Linmark's *Rolling the R's*, which is set in an impoverished Filipino American community in Kalihi, Hawaii in the 1970s. Structurally fragmented, it employs a number of different narrative styles in English and pidgin, first-person narrative, poetry, script, third-person, book report, and short story to capture the lives of a group of precocious fifth-graders who engage in various kinds of sexual activity. Gladys Nubla notes that in this text the use of creole language exposes "the logic and effects of global capitalism: neocolonialism, cultural hegemony, center-periphery relationships and a global division of labor where migrant laborers from economically disadvantaged countries are heavily exploited and abused by host countries."⁴² The Hawaiian Creole English or pidgin used by the "local, poor, working-class Filipino American residents in the novel is considered far inferior to 'standard' English" regulated by the education system.⁴³ American pop culture, TV shows such as Johnny Carson, *Charlie's Angels*, *M*A*S*H*, *The Facts of Life*, and *Dallas*, as well as pop singers and songs, such as Donna Summer's

“MacArthur Park” and the Bee Gees, and teen magazines, such as *Tiger Beat* and *16* form and influence the tweens and young teens, many of whom are gay. Robert Diaz notes that, “Linmark’s hybrid and fragmented writing” enables “a reconfiguration of affect outside of the US nation state. It encourages readers to imagine what performances of identity can look like when done by those outside of immigrant subjectivity’s limited forms, linked to the constricted ways the nation state is viewed.”⁴⁴ Diaz points out that while the “characters in the book envy and want to become Matt Dillon, Farrah Fawcett, and other American celebrities,” this “desire is not at all uni-directional.” Instead, the children “mess up these figures through their campiness, projecting a version of the celebrity that has already been reworked with a racialized part of themselves.”⁴⁵ For example, “while everybody in Kahili wants to be Farrah,”⁴⁶ they “camp her out, Filipino-fy, and queer her image,”⁴⁷ resulting in a transcultural and transgendered “Farrah Flip.”⁴⁸ One of the characters from this novel, Edgar Ramirez, appears in Linmark’s subsequent novel, *Leche*, which is a novel in the genre of a return narrative, like Bacho’s *Cebu*. As the returnee Vince observes, tours, and falls in love, Linmark raises questions about the diasporic subject’s belonging, tourism, nativism, and hybrid self.

The Post-9/11 Novel

The September 11 terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers have spawned a body of literature that has now become known as “Post-9/11” fiction. According to Kristiaan Versluys (as summarized by Pei-Chen Liao), this fiction falls into four categories: the novel of recuperation or conversion, firsthand witnessing, the great New York novel, and the novel of the outsider.⁴⁹ Alex Gilvarry’s *From the Memoirs of a Non-Enemy Combatant* is narrated by an “outsider” and can be considered a 9/11 New York novel even though it does not present a portrait of New York immediately after the attack, as Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* does. Nor does it mourn for people killed by the attacks, as in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. As a number of reviewers have noted, including Daniel Asa Rose and Nancy Wigston, *Memoirs of a Non-Enemy Combatant* feels like two novels put together.⁵⁰ One part of Boyet’s American life is a witty satire of the fashion industry, particularly the world of Brooklyn couture, and is counterpointed by a series of more serious scenes revealing the dangers of the post-9/11 world to those who look like “others” and who happen to be in the wrong place with the wrong people.

As the title suggests, this postmodern novel is written in the guise of the memoirs of the “fashion terrorist”⁵¹ Boyet Hernandez, complete with

acknowledgments, footnotes, and an afterword by a supposed editor, Gil Johannessen. Like the protagonists of Realuyo's novels, Boyet has grown up in the Philippines under the shadow of American neocolonialism and the lure of the American dream. On his first day in America, September 13, 2002, he instructs his cab driver to take him to the foot of Manhattan, Battery Park: "I had always dreamed of seeing the Statue of Liberty on my first day in America, no matter how impractical it was from my point of arrival. I wanted it to be a part of my first memory. Just like in the immigrant narratives I had read as a teenager. Oscar de la Renta, Diane von Furstenberg, etc" (6). Boyet's wide-eyed idealism of America as the land of opportunity is rendered comic by the mention of "immigrant narratives" of fashion designers, rather than important historical figures or writers. He is an intelligent, well-read, if somewhat narcissistic twenty-five-year-old aspiring designer who is so intent on getting his own line of clothing that he turns a blind eye to some of the suspicious signs that his financial backer, Ahmed Qureshi, is not really from Canada.

The dark comedy comes from the juxtaposition of Boyet's desperate situation as a detainee in Guantanamo Bay and his continuous obsession with fashion. In prison, he writes, "Never before in my life have I had to wear the same thing every day. My uniform is Day-Glo orange, the color of a prisoner. It's much too big and doesn't breathe. And so I tried to make do by removing the sleeves, which I did by hand" (77). He is mistakenly taken for Muslim and given a "standard-issue Qur'an . . . one foam prayer rug, one white skullcap, one plastic vial of oil (patchouli)," which are completely useless to him because he was baptized Catholic (20). As a Filipino, brown-skinned Boyet is a racialized other in George Bush's rhetoric of the "war against terror." What the novel illustrates is the daily realities of those considered "unlawful combatants" who, although not arrested, have been detained and denied protection by the Geneva Conventions. Boyet calls it "kidnapping" (193) and he becomes witness to many of the horrors of Guantanamo, including the SMERF (Secure Military Emergency Reaction Force), which is called in to pacify prisoners using pepper spray, clubs, fists, and boot heels (164–5). After five months in "No Man's Land," Boyet says, "Your mind becomes so clouded with dirty thoughts, bloody thoughts, that you begin to lose sight of what once seemed so important" (205). Gilvarry's novel presents the terrors of the post-9/11 world in a postmodern pastiche that is both funny and brutally somber.

In different ways, these novels engage with questions of history, personal and collective memory, and reveal colonial, neocolonial, and postcolonial

influences on Filipino American transnational and diasporic identity. The various generic conventions and styles that are used demonstrate a literature that has resonances with European and American novels, Philippine folk tales and indigenous wisdom, as well as popular TV shows, films, and culture. Relative to other immigrant communities in the United States, the Filipino American community is still young, but it is growing fast. The literature explored in this chapter reveals the multipronged nature, hybrid textures, and exciting developments that have occurred in the last twenty years. As this community develops and matures, its literary production continues to expand its rich thematic threads, narrative strategies, and engagement with sociopolitical concerns that affect not only Filipino Americans but Filipinos worldwide.

Notes

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- 3 *Ibid.*, 55.
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- 6 Sarita Echavez See, *The Decolonized Eye: Filipino American Art and Performance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xvi.
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- 8 Elizabeth H. Pisares, “Payback Time: Neocolonial Discourses in Peter Bacho’s *Cebu*,” *MELUS* 29.1 (2004): 79–98, see p. 80.
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- 27 Ponce, *Beyond the Nation*, 196.
- 28 Eleanor Ty, *Unfastened: Globality and Asian North American Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 4.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 4–5.
- 30 Diane L. Wolf, "Family Secrets: Transnational Struggles among Children of Filipino Immigrants," *Sociological Perspectives* 40.3 (1997): 457–82, see p. 459.
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- 32 Brian Ascalon Roley, *American Son* (New York: Norton, 2001), 15. Further references in parentheses in the text.
- 33 Ponce, *Beyond the Nation*, 197.
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- 37 Ponce, *Beyond the Nation*, 163.
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- 40 Ty, *The Politics of the Visible*, 177.
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- 45 Diaz, "Melancholic Maladies," 213.
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PART V



POST-1965 AND THE
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Beyond Solitary Confinement: Rethinking the Sociopolitical Context of Local Literature in Hawai‘i

SERI LUANGPHINITH

Local Literature and Literary Studies of the 1990s

There is no mistaking the turbulence that erupted in 1997–8 over Lois-Ann Yamanaka’s Association for Asian American Studies (AAAS) award for *Blu’s Hanging* and the impact that it had on the local literary scene in the Islands. The incident propelled Yamanaka into the national spotlight with her being quoted in *Newsweek* as feeling “frightened” over the fact that “It’s gotten very personal. . . . The critics have crept into my room and are peeping over my shoulder.”¹ This particular moment also revealed much about the Islands’ tendency toward provincialism and discrete factionalism that at one time pitted “Locals” against “Outsiders,” and later “Settler Asians” against “Native Hawaiians”; these sentiments would converge into a larger contention surrounding Lois-Ann Yamanaka’s *Blu’s Hanging* and the “intent” of the author in portraying Filipino men as sexual predators.

But to understand where local literature stands today, one must pull back the lens to view the larger conflict this brouhaha signified. Prior to this time, the Talk Story consortia of the 1970s (which included such writers as O.A. Bushnell, John Dominis Holt, Arnold Hiura, Eric Chock, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Stephen Sumida) challenged the trend of “Outsiders” serving as the voices of locals: “‘outsiders’ as such are not to be despised. An outsider may be a good writer; indeed, he can write a good novel about Hawai‘i. Some outsiders have done so. But the very fact that he is an outsider, a haole in the original sense of the word’s meaning as ‘stranger,’ makes him – by definition – one who cannot be fully acquainted with the subtleties of our island scene.”² Those early writers and their subsequent publications spurred the way for Bamboo Ridge Press, championed by two figures from Talk Story – Eric Chock and Darrell Lum. Their colleague, Stephen Sumida, would go on to publish in *The Best of Bamboo Ridge* (1986) an incendiary piece which

refuted James A. Michener's claim that "hard-working Asians did not write, did not cultivate verbal expression while they cultivated Hawaii's soil, much less indulge in verbal creativity."³ Sumida's later book, *And the View from the Shore: Literary Traditions of Hawai'i* (1991), would exalt the then distinctive works of key local Asian American writers – Milton Murayama, Patsy Saiki, James Hamada, Margaret Harada, Virgilio Menor Felipe, Darrell Lum, and Eric Chock – whose works represent what Sumida called a "distinctive set of circumstances, a different kind of pressure for public, community, family, and self-recognition from the more established place of the native Hawaiian poet. . . . By comparison, the Asian American poet seemed an oddity in his or her own culture. . . ."⁴ Cognizant of the emerging academic conflict that would later erupt along ethnic lines, Sumida's efforts to bring recognition to Hawai'i's budding local artists encouraged Bamboo Ridge Press to put its faith in many of them, including Lois-Ann Yamanaka, whose breakout collection of poems, *Saturday Night at the Pahala Theatre*, was published by the press as a special double issue in 1993. Yamanaka continued to flourish – she undertook on a "stint as a Distinguished Visiting Writer at Manoa," published several more books, including *Blu's Hanging*, and won the \$75,000 Lannan Literary Award for Fiction (1998) and the Hawai'i Award for Literature (2000).⁵

However, by the mid-to-late 1990s, the local literary scene was imploding. First, in 1994, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa's Candace Fujikane's assessment of "profound Local anxiety" vis-à-vis Hawaiian sovereignty evoked a critical response from graduate student Pamela Sachi Kido: "Fujikane's characterization of anxiety-ridden Locals may betray a touch of 'yellow guilt.' Excessive remorse over Local Japanese complicity in the disenfranchisement of native Hawaiians, much like white guilt, leads to defensive outbursts, weepy *mea culpas*, and eventually social paralysis – certainly no basis for critical, constructive social action and coalition building."⁶ Then in 1996, Eric Chock presented a paper at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa's English Department Colloquium Series to challenge the press in "trying to focus on one encompassing Local [identity], and the role this concept must play as the intellectual space in which to work through Hawaiian/Local/Haole issues."⁷ In 1997, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa Professor of Hawaiian Studies Haunani-Kay Trask countered with a presentation at the MELUS conference in Honolulu:

Despite their denials and confusions, Asians in Hawai'i are immigrants just like the haole are immigrants. Asians represent an amalgam of immigrant cultures, sometimes called "local" in our islands. . . . What ties local Asian

writers to each other is a much-revered plantation past which, curiously, most of them did not personally experience. This once-removed identification has created a false nostalgia on their work. The authenticity of lived experience is replaced by an often humorous romanticization which substitutes for developed characters and serious engagement. A celebration of pidgin English becomes a gloss for the absence of authentic sounds and authentic voices.⁸

Trask's arguments encapsulate the emerging perspective of the time regarding the general dominance of non-Native Hawaiian voices in the literary scene and within literary scholarship. Understandably, the proliferation of plantation-era stories was seen as a displacement of more "legitimate" narratives, namely those of Native Hawaiians for whom laboring in the cane fields was not a shared experience. Subsequent analyses by Asian American scholars identified local Asian writers as representatives of "'settler colonialism,' which defines Locals as migrants/settlers and *not* indigenous to the islands of Hawai'i, and therefore requires them to evaluate their responsibility to Hawaiian sovereignty and admit their collusion with more powerful forces of colonization in Native Hawaiian dispossession."⁹

Shortly after Trask's speech came a flurry of arguments between key writers and academicians, including Lois-Ann Yamanaka, whose fiction award from AAAS for *Blue's Hanging* became the topic of immense contention. Letters were published in *Honolulu Magazine*; most notable is the exchange between University of Hawai'i at Mānoa's ethnic studies Professor Jonathan Okamura, who defended AAAS's rescinding of its literary award, and a private citizen, William D. Cohen, who accused Okamura of promoting "ignorance and censorship."¹⁰ By 1998, the situation grew to phenomenal proportions, with write-ups appearing across the nation, pitting the board of AAAS against its own membership, and Mānoa scholars against the national community of Asian American writers, including Wing Tek Lum, Garrett Hongo, Jessica Hagedorn, and Frank Chin.¹¹ A later feature in the local newspaper further fleshed out the academic versus community divide with quotes from Kalamansi Books shop owner Rose Cruz Churma, who found the criticism against Yamanaka even more offensive to Filipinos: "The desire to kill one stereotype perpetuates a more dangerous stereotype. What we are saying is that Filipinos are devoid of critical thinking, that we cannot distinguish between fiction and reality."¹² The same feature ends with Bamboo Ridge editor Darrell Lum, who urged, "Maybe it's best to ask non-writers and non-academics to borrow the book from the library and draw their own conclusions."¹³ Critic Miyoko Sugano went further to suggest that academia was unable to see what

writers were writing about as anything but autobiographical, which therefore negated any creative rendering of issues.¹⁴

Rage and Fear – Writing in the Colonial Context

Though visceral, these arguments are not unique to the Hawaiian Islands. Whether in Algeria or Fiji or Hawai'i, the same problems concerning writing and racial identity emerge. What first materializes is a "nationalism" that often places the intelligentsia in a position of paternalism. As Frantz Fanon explains, "[when] the intellectual decides to come down into the common paths of real life, he only brings back from his adventuring formulas which are sterile in the extreme."¹⁵ Secondly, "At the very moment when the native intellectual is anxiously trying to create a cultural work he fails to realize that he is utilizing the techniques and language which are borrowed from the stranger in his country."¹⁶ Though framed as a fight against the neocolonization of the Islands by what Trask and others have argued is an Asian hegemony, the same logical fallacy dividing the intellectual and the people can be seen. The "native" intellectual thus turns to stereotypical if not calcified depictions of race and culture.¹⁷ In other words, as Mbembe argues, the intellectual processes that lead to a "resurgence of local identities" dovetails with an "extraordinary insistence on family and clan antecedents and birthplaces," and this sensibility leads to a static bifurcation between "indigenes" or "sons of the soil" versus "outsiders."¹⁸ This bifurcation becomes the ultimate guidepost for reading literature, as either "Hawaiian" or "Asian."

There is a reason why Jean-Paul Sartre called this phenomena a "contained fury, [which] instead of exploding, goes nowhere and ravages the oppressed instead."¹⁹ Like many colonized territories, Hawai'i is beset by "turf wars" over boundaries that clearly demarcate the class status ethnic groups were assigned to, as noted by Ronald Takaki in *Pau Hana*: "At the top of the slope was the nice house, the home of the manager; below were the 'nicer-looking' homes of the Portuguese, Spanish, and Japanese lunas [work bosses]; then the 'identical wooden frame houses of Japanese Camp'; and finally the 'more run-down Filipino Camp.'"²⁰ The racial classification of occupations led to interethnic conflicts, often manifested as expressions of anti-Asian sentiments, and they are best documented by Gary Y. Okihiro and Dean T. Alegado.²¹ Such sentiments pitted immigrant communities against one another, as seen in this candid portrayal of Filipino camp life during World War II:

"Ti la nasayat a Hapon ket ti kapon!" The only good Jap is a castrate! I even hit a Jap for nothing and felt nothing. Another time, we swaggered laughing

through the streets in Hilo smashing beer, wine, and whisky bottles on every street sign we came to. A Kanaka [Hawaiian] cop pushed us against the wall, but a fist in his face and the password, "Who you think we are, Japs?" and he did not bother us anymore.²²

These "caricatures" – Filipino, Japanese, and Native Hawaiian – as discrete entities in the streets of Hilo town are similar to what Achille Mbembe describes as "tribal" conflicts that entail deep questions of "Who is to be protected, by whom, against what and whom, and at what price? Who is equal to whom? To what has one a right by virtue of belonging to an ethnic group, a region, or a religion? Who has the right to take power and govern, in what circumstances, how, for how long, and on what conditions? . . . In short, who has the right to live and exist, and who has not, and why?"²³ Such underlying anxieties are probably what later fed to the identification of other Asians apart from the Japanese as representing a "hegemony" that works against indigenous Hawaiians, or, as Haunani-Kay Trask would articulate, "The history of our colonization becomes a twice-told tale, first of discovery and settlement by European and American businessmen and missionaries, then of the plantation Japanese, Chinese, and eventually Filipino rise to dominance in the islands."²⁴ Unanswered questions regarding the (im)migrant's adoption of place underpin the struggle for identity in colonized and postcolonized territories, a struggle that can manifest in an intrepidity that is echoed in the words of Pamela Sachi Kido (cited earlier in this essay) and of Lois-Ann Yamanaka, who was once quoted as saying, "If fear enters your writing – the fear of criticism, of political correctness, of truth – you need to put your pen down."²⁵

Beyond the Confines of the 1990s – Lois-Ann Yamanaka and the Ghosts of Conflicts Past

And yet, for all of Yamanaka's bravado, insularity and fear (expressed as defensive rage) are exactly what have lain at the heart of her writing. A prime example is her controversial story of three Japanese children of Moloka'i in *Blu's Hanging*, which includes the tough guy Paulo and his revealing tirade just a few pages preceding his sexual molestation of Blu:

whass wrong with my niece playing wit' yo' bradda? What, he mo' betta than her 'cause he Japanee? Fuck, Japns for they think they mo' betta than everybody else, fuckas. Especially the Filipinos, shit. You fuckin' snipes. . . . Fuckin' haoles [whites]. They mo' worse than the Japs the way they act like we just a truckload of fuckin' brownines picking pineapples for minimum wage. Fuckas all hate us Filipinos.²⁶

While critics focused on Paulo's sexual perversion, his racial hatred remained underanalyzed. Paulo is not so much the Filipino bogeyman as he is a local version of what Fanon saw happening to the occupied peoples of Northern Africa: "The Algerian's criminality, his impulsivity, and the violence of his murders are therefore not the consequence of the organization of the nervous system or of characterial originality, but the direct product of the colonial situation."²⁷ Paulo is another face of colonialism – the rage emanating from perceived rejection that lashes out at everything while ironically reaffirming the plantation hierarchy and the conditions for "being" economically and socially oppressed.

Yamanaka survived the turmoil of the 1990s, though some would argue not without cost. Reviewer Mindy Pennybacker judged Yamanaka's *Heads by Harry* (which followed *Blu's Hanging*) as "oddly incomplete," as the writer seems to have "replaced racism with sexism and homophobia, 'safer topics.'"²⁸ Yamanaka's most recent work, *Behold the Many*, dates back to 2006, and while the narrative avoids the "dangerous" territory of Filipino representation, the themes of fear and rage upend the concept of *hapa* or mixed-race hybrid spaces as an ideal narrative, as seen in Bamboo Ridge's anthology *Intersecting Circles: the Voices of Hapa Women in Poetry and Prose*. The collection includes such telling poems as Noelle Kahanu's "For Only the Ninety-Sixth Time This Year, My Mother: 'You Can Fall In Love With Whomever You Want, But Only Mate With Hawaiians'" and Kyo Maclear's "Movements in Exile," and what editor Marie Hara calls "Negotiating the Hyphen" and an opportunity to initiate "alternative ways of understanding the ethnic differences among people."²⁹

Behold the Many is set in the time of a tuberculosis outbreak and large-scale immigration (1910s–20s), with the names of Sun-Yat Sen and the Mahatma Gandhi casually inserted in conversations. It paints a bleak picture of "aloha" while revisiting caricatures that informed her earlier books. Honolulu is portrayed as a vibrant collection of peoples: "haole mission homes with vast lawns, Japanese flower growers, Okinawan piggeries, wet Chinese taro patches, and Portuguese and Hawaiian dairies."³⁰ But beneath the veneer are dysfunctional family dynamics, laid open by the blunt words of a Portuguese father to his wife, the mother of his children:

The way I touch you at night, put my hand over your mouth, put my weight on your struggling body, then put my long flesh deep inside you until you bleed. Japonêsa cunt. Did you know the matchmaker sold you to me for cheap? For a one-way ticket home? He is still around somewhere drinking sake all day and night. I see him all the time. He likes to watch you bleed.³¹

Other rapists are embedded, this time in the guise of an opium-addicted Chinese “uncle” and a transient white man who is paid for his “handiwork.” Their victims include a homeless orphaned mixed race boy and his “ugly” niece.³² All the while, the main character of the story, Anah, barely survives amidst male-female, parent-child relationships gone awry, in fear of the tortured, angry ghosts she constantly sees and what they symbolize: “[what] no amount of schooling would remedy . . . innate immigrant’s stupidity. . . . Half-witted, uneducable, uncultivated, Oriental Oceania ancestor and idol worshipping heathens, field laborers, rice paddy stock.”³³ In other words, immigrants are and forever will be immigrants – nothing erases that indelible fact. So while Filipinos are largely missing in what may be a “safer” approach to racism, Yamanaka’s problematizing of *hapa* as well as the reappropriation of the image of the dirty, diseased foreigner coalesce in what amounts to a rejection of *Intersecting Circles* and the dominant scholarly perspective of the 1990s, which, on the national level, led critics like Homi Bhabha to celebrate hybridity as “mockery” and a destabilizing force undercutting colonial authority.³⁴ To many residents of Hawai‘i, however, “hapa” is a lived reality, not a special state of being. Most people are a mix of many ethnic and racial backgrounds. So the argument that “hapa” or hybridity is a theoretical option is rather hollow, because it never was a solution to the problem to begin with.

To return to the “tribalism” that haunts the ethnic, if not specifically Asian, literature of the Islands, we must remain cognizant of the macrocosmic forces that played out in the most provincial places, like the Kalihi Valley of Yamanaka’s novel. The references to Sun Yat-Sen and Mohandas Gandhi by the writer are not coincidental, because the 1910s through the 1930s (which is the setting for *Behold the Many*) witnessed the emerging refutation of Anglo-Europe and Anglo-America’s dominance in and around the Pacific.³⁵ As noted by Pankaj Mishra, the Japanese defeat of the Russian Navy in 1905 would directly influence every major thinker and revolutionary in the colonized and exploited regions of Asia – Jawaharlal Nehru, Rabindranath Tagore, Mohandas Gandhi, Sun Yat-Sen (who himself spent time on O‘ahu and Maui), Mustafa Kemal, Yan Fu, and even Mao Zedong.³⁶ *Behold the Many* ultimately reveals an era of competing ideologies. Japan’s rapid development provoked “European and American visions of the ‘yellow peril,’ a fearful image of Asiatic hordes overrunning the white West” through “pan-Asianism” and Asia’s belief in liberating itself from the “white peril” which had subjugated India, Indonesia, South East Asia (including Laos and Vietnam), China, and the Philippines.³⁷ Hawai‘i’s own push against the increasing hegemony of Anglo-America began much earlier and sparked a “Hawaii for Hawaiians”

slogan back in the 1882 elections along with King David Kalākaua's advocacy of a "Union and Federation of the Asiatic Nations and Sovereigns," which he proposed directly to the Japanese Emperor just the year before.³⁸ Arguably, the anti-Japanese and the antiwhite sentiments that underpin stories by local-born or local-heritage writers are remnants of this earlier period ("local-born" refers to those writers who were born in Hawai'i but who grew up or are now living elsewhere, and "local-heritage" refers to those writers of Hawai'i who were born elsewhere but who move back to the islands to claim a heritage). The need to displace the Japanese presence would "necessitate" the importation of other ethnic groups, namely the Filipinos, who surpassed the Japanese as the largest ethnic group working the plantations, and they in turn became the lowest wage earners.³⁹ Such changing social dynamics, combined with the outbreak of World War II, would eventually give way to the tensions described in *Blu's Hanging*.

Beyond Provincial – Local Literature as a Global Voice

The global sparring for political hegemony that directly influenced the plantation hierarchy of race relations has been increasingly scrutinized in recent years, encouraging local-heritage writers to look beyond the confines of Hawai'i's shores to delve into the larger geopolitical machinations that play out on the level of the individual. Two works in particular offer a glimpse into this new trajectory: Michelle Cruz Skinner's *In the Company of Strangers* (2009) and Juliet Kono's *Anshū: Dark Sorrow* (2010) – two works released by Bamboo Ridge Press that spend more time addressing the intricate social dynamics of ethnic communities outside of the Islands than within them.

For Skinner, Hawai'i is just a small aspect of the larger collection of voices and experiences of the Filipino Diaspora. The story "The Old Man's Head {A Memoir}" actually begins with a reference to the Islands – "Hawai'i, my present, stands out as so much greener than Olongapo ever was" – but it is a reference that seems to lose all significance as the speaker drifts into a discussion of life under the Marcos regime.⁴⁰ Such passing, almost irrelevant mentioning of the Islands underscores the larger problems at hand: Spanish and American colonialism (spread through an education system that divided foreign-educated Filipinos from the local population), the exploitation of migrant labor, and the Vietnam War (and the fact that Subic Bay helped to train fighter pilots in the techniques of jungle survival) are all brought together to bear relation to the various characters of Cruz's collection of stories through

ties to Hawai'i. After all, Hawai'i and the Philippines are not only linked in terms of a history of immigration, but both share the unfortunate distinction of being "twin colonial Pacific possessions of Washington."⁴¹

The same tactic of "minimizing" Hawai'i is also used by Kono in a novel where the narrator ends up among the "untouchable" *hibakusha*, or atomic bomb survivors. The story begins with what immigration really means: "Mama failed to recognize that she was the product of a strong-willed people. Coming to Hawai'i in 1920 on her own had given her a measure of self-confidence unheard of in Japan. It had changed her, and, in our time, changed us. My passion for fire was part of this willfulness – the single focus I had on what I was going to burn next."⁴² What is born from the immigrant experience is a voice and a persona that does "[e]verything [it] wasn't supposed to do or touch."⁴³ Himiko Aoki's inability to follow cultural dictates eventually leads her to be shipped off to Japan as an unwed mother, only to experience being an outcast in her parents' homeland – first as a burden to her relatives, then as a "Japanese traitor" and a suspected American spy once World War II breaks out. Her perpetual feeling of unbelonging anywhere reveals the suffering experienced on the level of the individual caught between opposing countries and cultures. And her experience becomes symbolic of the real men, women, and children who ultimately pay the price in the clash of civilizations, between the "white peril" and its yellow counterpart. The ongoing hardships inflicted on Himiko – who will lose all ties to Hawai'i, a cousin who reluctantly becomes and dies as a *kamikaze*, her own child, and a fiancé who abandons her when she's left disfigured by the bombing – leads to self-revelation on the narrator's own function within her story: "While I was carrying the weight of my life – my guilt over the children, and other members of my family – people I loved and hated – I was also carrying the weight of countless others, and in the end, all of humanity."⁴⁴ Such is the "universal" (as opposed to "provincial") aspects of Kono's book that leaves the Islands behind to engage a larger, religious purpose of expounding "the four Noble Truths."⁴⁵

Round Two – Messed Up Men in the New Hawai'i

The higher, religious aspirations of Juliet Kono and Wing Tek Lum – whose work *The Nanjing Massacre: Poems* looks at Japanese atrocities during World War II – are rare among the majority of local writers, who still feature grotesquely self-absorbed, self-imploding characters in their writing. But theirs is no longer a world of cane-hauling and camp bogeymen, but a dystopic, urban Americanized landscape. Touted as a "dark comedy" by local playwright

Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl, Lee Cataluna's *Three Years on Doreen's Sofa* revolves around an "anti-hero," Bobby – the ex-convict who can't get his life together – and his sister, Doreen, who represents the "fear, slash, anger, slash survival that makes you do stuff you don't want to do."⁴⁶ And the Maui of today is a place that tests everyone's ability to survive. Bobby's first observations on coming out of prison make this extremely clear: "Maui changed plenty in 37 months. All look-alike houses came up where cane fields used to be. Ooka's Supermarket closed. Dairy Queen is called something else."⁴⁷ What's more telling is how "success" looks per his idolized portrayal of his sibling:

She is a professional woman and she work hard to maintain her professional-ism in her career. That's what they taught her at Wahine Imua job training, where she turned her life around from an endless cycle of trying to score a union truck driver so she could marry rich. From there, she dropped her mop bucket and push broom and left behind her career as a school sanitation specialist for a fast-paced, high stress, on-the-go job as a Budget Rent A Car airport shuttle van driver. She the first one in our family to get off assistance. To me, she living life in the fast lane, even if she only driving in a loop from the airport baggage claim to the rental car lot and back.⁴⁸

Doreen serves as a tragicomical foil for Bobby, who never loses his happy-go-lucky disposition about family bonds and how his sister loves him enough "to electrocute [him] with a toaster and give [him] another chance."⁴⁹ Through Bobby's eyes, we get a glimpse of a woman on edge, who continually reminds her brother that he is the "most full-of-crap person who ever walked through [her] door" and whose only interest in him at the end is primarily due to auto insurance payouts over an injury settlement.⁵⁰ Once her brother lands back in jail for taking a joy ride on a backhoe through a parking lot after "[e]ighteen beers, four joints, some coke, some meth, and a pack of cigarettes," she will only see him once to have him sign over the money to her.⁵¹

However, it is Bobby's undying belief in the clichés about *ohana* (family) and the local spirit that make the landscape of Maui all the more "unreal":

I went from table to table and nobody told me, "Hey, good fun uncle! Glad you showed up! Here, let us make you a plate! Grab a cold one and join the party!"

Nope, none of that action. Some kids pointed and laughed at me. Some of the small girls ran screaming. One of the daddies told me to get the fuck out of there before he broke my ass. What happened to the aloha, I like know? What happened to ohana and everybody getting along? I thought this was Hawaii? When did this stuff get so crazy and mean? Can't a naked, loaded, crazy, bleeding man find a place at the picnic table anymore?⁵²

Given the fact that Maui ranks on par with O'ahu as the destination of choice per statistics from the Hawai'i Tourism Authority, Bobby's world of drugs and frenetic behavior belies the images of the tropical paradise often found in guidebooks. But it is an image that officials in the state vehemently maintain.⁵³ In 2009, *Saturday Night Live* aired a skit featuring Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson and Fred Armisen as disgruntled, underpaid performers on Kaua'i who tell a tourist that while the visitors enjoy the beaches, they live fifteen miles inland in a rusty pick-up truck near a shanty town and meth lab. This drew the ire from then Lieutenant Governor James "Duke" Aiona, who was cited in a *Huffington Post* blog as being "worried the skit might hurt the state's biggest industry and [that he] plans to send a letter in protest to Lorne Michaels, the NBC program's executive producer."⁵⁴

Not surprisingly, writers are targeting the elites in the state, who led the charge toward a bifurcated society of gated ocean-front communities and at-risk populations living in dilapidated conditions. Chris McKinney's *Boi No Good* is exemplary in this latest "genre" of contemporary prose. His novel weaves two divergent social-class narratives – those of the "ghetto Hawaiians," or the "real men in Hawaii" who "end up going to jail and collecting disability," with those who live in gated communities and have "done more for Hawaii than most Hawaiians . . . more for Hawaii than most who have Kamehameha attached to their name."⁵⁵ By having the prominent senator Charles Knotting adopt a Hawaiian boy from a dysfunctional setting, McKinney sets in motion a story that exposes how the two are inextricably locked together in parallel emotions that guide them:

His eyes turn south toward the Royal Kona Resort, which from this distance looks like an ocean liner beached upside down. A part of him wants to rent a room there, maybe hang under the blue hut-looking thing and watch white girls in bikinis sip pina colodas poolside. The other part wants to see a raging river of lava burn it to the ground. . . . They, none of them, understand the rage, how it floods from his feet to his head. And when it rises to his throat and fills his mouth, at that point, for Boi, it's either spew or drown.⁵⁶

This conflict, of simultaneously wanting to be a part of and yet despising the "paradise" that Hawai'i has become, only intensifies as the broken family of three children – Shane (the adopted son of Senator Knotting), Boi, and Glory – meet up again and old jealousies take on the added burden of disparate fortunes. In the end, fate will lead Boi to facilitate his bother Shane's death and to foist blame on his sister for the murder. These betrayals further prove the impotency of Boi's rage, whose every attempt to block Senator Knotting's initiative of progress only gives further strength to the latter: "Every time he

tried to chop the big man down, The Gov just got bigger. . . . It was Boi who had shaken Waikiki loose enough for the hurricane to do all that damage. And The Gov grew it again . . . Boi made Charles Knotting a fucking national hero.”⁵⁷ Boi is Yamanaka’s Uncle Paulo all over again but on a larger scale; failed rebellion against the machine of capitalism, urban development, and liberal politics, which seek to exercise paternalism over the exploited masses that make Waikīkī possible, leaves the haunted characters just as socially isolated and politically contained as ever.

Moving On? Local Literature Today

The literature of Hawai‘i represents a point of departure from conventional definitions of ethnic literatures, such as the one used to define the general trajectory of this collection and demonstrated by the challenging decisions over “who” to include in this chapter. While it is widely known that Lois-Ann Yamanaka and Juliet Kono are Japanese American, Chris McKinney has stopped making references to his Korean, Japanese, and Scottish heritage (information that has only graced the back cover of his first book, *The Tattoo*, in 1999). While Lee Cataluna is listed on the website called “Asian American Theatre Review,” she refers to herself as “Portuguese Hawaiian” in an interview on PBS.⁵⁸ Perhaps this is the reason why Michelle Cruz Skinner is a little tongue-in-cheek in her short story “Ten-Fold Path” that follows the experience of a Hawai‘i-raised Filipino boy who confronts “Filipino-ness” at a Stockton, California, Barrio Fiesta where they sell “Born-Again Pinoy” T-shirts.⁵⁹ In many ways, writers are taking their ethnicities “off the shelf” in terms of how they want their works to be considered and analyzed. According to one author who wishes to remain anonymous, “I am more than the sum of my ancestry,” which is why things are different here in the Islands, at least for the majority of the artists and scholars who have informed this essay.

More important, the body of literature from the Islands spotlights what Wendy Motooka observed back in the turbulent 1990s as deep “disciplinary” differences entrenched in the way we approach texts – that sometimes the goals of literary studies can be “incompatible” with the approaches used by the social sciences (namely ethnic studies).⁶⁰ However, the dual analysis of colonial history and literature need not always be at crosshairs, for the writers of Hawai‘i do “reexamine [their] own relationship to knowledge, authority, and place – an especially ambivalent relationship in colonial contexts.”⁶¹ Part of colonial “ambivalence” finds expression through the diversity of responses to it, a diversity that encapsulates contradictory positions. Patsy Iwasaki and

Avery Berido's *Hidden Hero: Shirarezaru Eiyū* and Franklin Odo's *Voices from the Canfields: Folksongs of Japanese Immigrant Works in Hawai'i* reveal a continuing commitment to document and preserve plantation memories, whereas other writers are expanding beyond the confines of the past. And many writers today are no longer bound to just the University of Hawai'i Press, Mutual Publishing, or Bamboo Ridge. The Hawai'i Council for the Humanities is now promoting major themes and writers through their release of *We Go Eat: A Mixed Plate from Hawai'i's Food Culture* (2008) and *We Go Jam: Celebrating Our Music, Our Soundscape, Our Hawai'i* (2012). Cultural centers from around the state are beginning to encourage and sponsor writing with an Island-specific theme – such as East Hawai'i Cultural Council's *Aloha 'Āina: Big Island Memories* (2012), which has poems and stories representing all six major districts of the Island – Hilo, Hāmākua, Waimea/Kohala, Kona, Ka'ū, and Puna.

Whether uncontained rage against everything or an elysian nostalgia that preserves an important sense of the past, the literature of Hawai'i continues to reflect the lingering geopolitical conflicts that played out and continue to affect the lives of ordinary people. Any reading of Hawai'i and its literary heritages must take into account the clash of ideologies between Euro-centric and Asian-centric postures, having coalesced into a unique variance of voices and perspectives on race, place, and belonging that cannot be easily compared with those of other "ethnic" communities that find their way into this larger collection of scholarship. And even if the voices that emerge seem inconsistent, contradictory, and even combative, it is important to remember that this, too, is the working of decolonization:

It took much private and public tumult, and great physical and intellectual journeys, to bring these thinkers to the point where they could make sense of themselves and their environment, and then the knowledge they achieved after too much toil was often full of pain and did not offer hope. They often seemed to change their minds and contradict themselves. . . . Personally powerless, they lurched between hope and despair, vigorous commitment and a sense of futility. Still, there is a striking unity to be observed in their perceptions, and this is because as traditionalists or iconic radicals, these thinkers and activists were struggling to articulate a satisfying answer to the same question: how to reconcile themselves and others to the dwindling of their civilizations through internal decay and Westernization while regaining parity and dignity in the eyes of the white rulers of the world.⁶²

The early exponents of local writing in the Islands were no less intrepid in addressing what they understood as the waning and waxing of the plantation, which was symbolic of their people's purpose and presence while also

demanding to be recognized as legitimate tellers of their own stories instead of having it told for them by “Outsiders.” And this brings us, in closing, back to the words of Arnold Hiura in 1978, and why Talk Story and Bamboo Ridge were conceived: “there seems to be a rejuvenated spirit and camaraderie amongst literary artists of Hawaii; that some important new lines of communication have been opened up between writers working in Hawaii and on the mainland; and that all of this could spell some changes. . . . In what I believe is more than mere rationalization, Talk Story, in some respects, cannot ‘fail.’”⁶³ Given the continuing work of many, from large-scale writers like Chris McKinney, to the smaller regional productions of the Big Island, it would appear the failure to speak is and never will be an option in the Islands.

Notes

- 1 Donna Foote, “Trouble in Paradise: A Hawaiian Novelist Sparks a P.C. Protest,” *Newsweek* (August 17, 1993): 63.
- 2 O. A. Bushnell, “Hawaii Writers Stifled at Birth, One of Them Says,” *The Sunday Star Bulletin and Advertiser* (June 25, 1978): F-3. The original Talk Story Conference was held at Mid Pacific Institute on June 19–24, 1978, and included in addition to those mentioned: prominent Hawaiian studies scholar John Charlot; Hawaiian language scholars Larry Kimura and Haunani Bernardino; *Kumu Hula* Kaha’i Topolinski, John Ka’imikaua, and Wayne Chang; Asian American writers Lawson Fusao Inada, Shawn Wong, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Ronald Takaki, Jessica Hagedorn, and Garret Hongo; singer/songwriters Peter Moon and Leon Siu; and local writers Darryl Keola Cabacugan, Philip Ige, Kazuo Miyamoto, Wing Tek Lum, Mari Kubo, Marie Hara, Wayne Kaumualii Westlake, and Milton Murayama.
- 3 Stephen Sumida, “Waiting for the Big Fish: Recent Research on the Asian American Literature of Hawaii,” in *The Best of Bamboo Ridge*, ed. Eric Chock and Darrell Yum (Honolulu, HI: Bamboo Ridge, 1986), 303.
- 4 Stephen Sumida, *And the View from the Shore: Literary Traditions of Hawai’i* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), 254.
- 5 Cynthia Oi, “Lois-Ann Yamanaka: Her ‘Blu’s Hanging’ Made Waves in Hawaii as Well as in Literature,” *Star Bulletin* (1 January 1999): A7; Wanda Adams, “Yamanaka, Altizer Awarded Literature Laurels,” *Honolulu Advertiser* (August 4 2002). Online resource: the.honoluluadvertiser.com/article/2002/Aug/04/il/ilo8a.html.
- 6 Candace Fujikane, “Between Nationalism: Hawai’i’s Local Nation and Its Troubled Racial Paradise,” *Critical Mass: A Journal of Asian American Cultural Criticism* 1.2 (1994): 23. Pamela Sachi Kido, “Local Identity in a (Trans)Nationalist Hawaiian Space,” in *The Office for Women’s Research Student Working Papers Series: Women in Hawai’i, Asia and the Pacific*, ed. Judy Rohrer (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i at Mānoa, 1995), 23.
- 7 Eric Chock, “The Neocolonization of Bamboo Ridge: Repositioning Bamboo Ridge and Local Literature in the 1990s,” *Bamboo Ridge* 69 (Spring 1996): 20.
- 8 Haunani-Kay Trask, “Writing in Captivity: Poetry in a Time of De-Colonization,” Keynote Speech, MELUS, Honolulu, HI, April 18, 1997.

- 9 Brenda Kwon, "Hawai'i," in *A Companion to the Regional Literatures of America*, ed. Charles L. Crow (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 460.
- 10 Both letters can be found in *Honolulu Magazine* 22.3 (September 1997): 14.
- 11 See Peter Monaghan, "Literary Award Throws Asian-American-Studies Group into an Uproar," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (July 2, 1998). Online resource: <http://jobs.chronicle.com/article/Literary-Award-Throws/104565/>. Also see Nadine Kam, "Writer's Blu's: Yamanaka's Award for 'Blu's Hanging' Is Yanked, Igniting a Hot Debate about Literature vs. Social Responsibility," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* (July 3, 1998). Online resource: <http://archives.starbulletin.com/98/07/06/features/story1.html>.
- 12 Kam, "Writer's Blu's."
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Miyoko Sugano, "'Hawai'i's Local Literature,'" *Meridians* 1.1 (2000): 126.
- 15 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 221.
- 16 Ibid., 223.
- 17 Ibid., 221, 224.
- 18 Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 87.
- 19 Jean-Paul Sarte, *Colonialism and Neocolonialism*, trans. Azzedine Haddour, Steve Brewer, and Terry McWilliams (London: Routledge, 2001), 163.
- 20 Ronald Takaki, *Pau Hana: Plantation Life and Labor in Hawaii* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1983), 92.
- 21 See Gary Y. Okihiro, *Cane Fires: The Anti-Japanese Movement in Hawaii, 1865-1945* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991); Dean T. Alegado, "The Filipino Community in Hawaii: Development and Change," *Social Process in Hawaii* 33 (1991): 12-38. Ruben R. Alcantra provides documentation on the uneven distribution of different ethnic groups among "skilled," "semi-skilled," and "common laborers" using an O'ahu sugar plantation as an example with whites dominating the first category, Hawaiians, Chinese, and Japanese dominating the second category, and Filipinos having the largest representation in the last for the years 1940 and 1945. See Ruben Alcantra, *Sakada: Filipino Adaptation In Hawaii* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981), 39.
- 22 Virgilio Menor Felipe, *Hawai'i A Pilipino Dream* (Honolulu, HI: Mutual Press, 2002), 164.
- 23 Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 67.
- 24 Haunani-Kay Trask, "Settlers of Color and 'Immigrant Hegemony: 'Locals' in Hawai'i," in *Whose Vision? Asian Settler Colonialism in Hawai'i*, ed. Candace Fujikane and Jonathan Y. Okumura (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 3.
- 25 "Shot Down," *Honolulu Magazine* (July 1997): 14.
- 26 Lois-Ann Yamanaka, *Blu's Hanging* (New York: Avon Books, 1997), 207. For the scene with the caged dogs, see pages 110-16.
- 27 Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 309.
- 28 Mindy Pennybacker, "What Boddah You? The Authenticity Debate," *The Nation* 128.8 (1999): 29.
- 29 Mary Murphy Hara, "Negotiating the Hyphen," in *Intersecting Circles: The Voices of Hapa Women in Poetry and Prose*, ed. Marie Hara and Nora Okja Keller (Honolulu, HI: Bamboo Ridge, 1999), 15.
- 30 Lois-Ann Yamanaka, *Behold the Many* (New York: Picador, 2006), 15.

- 31 Ibid., 87.
- 32 Ibid., 303.
- 33 Ibid., 102.
- 34 Kanishka Chowdhury, "It's All within Your Reach: Globalization and the Ideologies of Postnationalism and Hybridity," *Cultural Logic* 5 (2002): par. 10. Chowdhury acknowledges the "liberatory and unsettling potential of these [Bhabha's] margins of hybridity," but also adds a "cautionary note to Bhabha's general celebration of hybridity" in terms of "whose interests these hybrid enunciations serve" (par. 25 and 26).
- 35 In *Behold the Many*, the reference to Sun-Yat Sen can be found in Yamanaka, *Behold the Many*, 69. The reference to Mohandas Gandhi is located in *ibid.*, 194.
- 36 Pankaj Mishra, *From the Ruins of Empire: The Intellectuals Who Remade Asia* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 1–5.
- 37 Ibid., 3, 154–5.
- 38 Gerald Horne, *The White Pacific: U.S. Imperialism and Black Slavery in the South Seas after the Civil War* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 103, 124.
- 39 Miriam Sharma, "Labor Migration and Class Formation among the Filipinos in Hawaii, 1906–1946," in *Labor Immigration under Capitalism: Asian Workers in the United States before World War II*, ed. Lucie Cheng and Edna Bonacich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 586–7.
- 40 Michelle Cruz Skinner, "The Old Man's Head {A Memoir}," in *In the Company of Strangers* (Honolulu, HI: Bamboo Ridge Press, 2009), 77.
- 41 Gerald Horne, *Fighting in Paradise: Labor Unions, Racism, and Communists in the Making of Modern Hawai'i* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), 23.
- 42 Juliet S. Kono, *Anshū: Dark Sorrow* (Honolulu, HI: Bamboo Ridge Press, 2010), 18.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 Ibid., 319.
- 45 "Interview with author Juliet S. Kono," *Bamboo Ridge*. Online resource: <http://www.bambooridge.com/feature.aspx?fid=171> (accessed July 17, 2013).
- 46 "Lee Cataluna: Creation and Change," interview by Leslie Wilcox, *LongStoryShort*, PBS, December 3, 2011. Online resource: http://www.pbshawaii.org/ourproductions/longstory_transcripts/LSS%20512%20Transcript%20-%20Lee%20Cataluna%20%20-%20Creation%20and%20Change.pdf. The quotation from Kneubuhl is found on the back cover of Cataluna's novel.
- 47 Lee Cataluna, *Three Years on Doreen's Sofa* (Honolulu, HI: Bamboo Ridge Press, 2011), 1.
- 48 Ibid., 17.
- 49 Ibid., 190.
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 Ibid., 208.
- 52 Ibid., 209.
- 53 Hawaii Tourism Authority, "Table 6: Visitor Arrivals by Island and Month: 1990–2009," Arrivals by Island, Historical Island Data, Historical Visitor Statistics. Online resource: <http://www.hawaiitourismauthority.org/research/reports/historical-visitor-statistics/>.
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Contemporary Asian American Drama

ESTHER KIM LEE

Introduction: The First Wave

In 1968, the East West Players in Los Angeles held its first playwriting competition to encourage Asian Americans to write for theater. Founded in 1965, the East West Players originally aimed to promote the careers of Asian American actors, but it became clear that without original plays by and about Asian Americans the company would not last.¹ In the 1960s, playwriting was not perceived as a possible profession for Asian American writers, and Asian American plays were virtually nonexistent. Plays, by definition, need to be produced and staged, and playwrights must work within an infrastructure and industry of theater. The East West Players' playwriting competition lasted three years during which playwrights such as Momoko Iko and Frank Chin made their debut in theater. In 1973, Frank Chin led the founding of the Asian American Theatre Workshop (later renamed Asian American Theatre Company) in San Francisco with the explicit agenda to create and produce Asian American plays. Although Chin left the company in a few years, his influence as a playwright has been lasting in Asian American theater. His two published plays, *Chickencoop Chinaman* (1972) and *The Year of the Dragon* (1974), are considered foundational in Asian American drama, and the Asian American Theatre Company has continued to support new Asian American playwrights.²

Frank Chin belongs to the first wave Asian American playwrights who pioneered Asian American drama. Also in the first wave are Jon Shirota, Momoko Iko, Dom Magwili, Wakako Yamauchi, Karen Tei Yamashita, Perry Miyake, Bill Shinkai, Paul Stephen Lim, Jeffery Paul Chan, Garrett Hongo, and Edward Sakamoto. These writers used the genre of drama to imagine new narratives about both the general history and the individual stories of Asian Americans. Many of their plays deal with important Asian American historical moments such as the internment of Japanese American during World War II and the creation of Chinatowns. Autobiography and realism were the dominant modes

of dramatizing their stories and characters. Wakako Yamuchi, for instance, wrote in her play *The Music Lessons* (1977) about her childhood in a Japanese American farming family during the Great Depression in California's Imperial Valley. The first-wave playwrights included in their plays details of their personal experience with racism, displacement, and what Karen Shimakawa calls "national abjection."³ The influence of the first-wave playwrights on contemporary Asian American drama has been substantial and enduring. Themes of history, autobiography, assimilation, and racism usually associated with first-wave playwrights would continue to be dramatized and investigated by second- and third-wave playwrights.

Going Mainstream: The Second Wave

In 1986, David Henry Hwang's play *Rich Relations* premiered at the Second Stage Theatre in New York City. By then, Hwang had written three plays – *FOB* (1979), *The Dance and the Railroad* (1981), and *Family Devotions* (1983) – all of which were received well and advanced Hwang's career as an Asian American playwright. The three plays have been described by Hwang as his Chinese American Trilogy, and they deal directly with issues of assimilation, identity, and racial politics. *Rich Relations* was Hwang's first attempt to write characters not defined by their race or ethnicity. The play is about his family's preoccupation with money and religion, and it is considered the most autobiographical of Hwang's oeuvre. However, the cast of the premiere was all white, and the play was staged as a story about an affluent WASP family in Los Angeles. The play was not received well by critics and audiences, and Hwang has called the play his first "flop." Soon after the failure of the play, Hwang went on to write *M. Butterfly* and win the Tony Award for Best Play in 1988. However, he has described *Rich Relations*, his least successful work, as the play he had to write.

Hwang's imperative to write the play raises a number of questions that affected second-wave Asian American playwrights. By *second wave*, I refer to Asian American playwrights who began their playwriting careers in the late 1970s and the 1980s. The wave indicates a particular generation in terms of the age of the writers, but it also marks a unique approach to playwriting. In general, the second-wave playwrights faced a new set of questions that had not affected the first wave. Does an Asian American play have to feature Asian American characters? Why do white male playwrights get to write about any topic while women and minority writers are expected to write only about

their personal experience? What happens when race is erased out of what is otherwise an autobiographical story? What requirements are imposed on minority playwrights, and for whom should they write? Since the 1980s, these questions stemmed from American theater's tendency to use the rhetoric of multiculturalism to pigeonhole minority and women writers. At the time, it was difficult for playwrights of color to have their plays produced at mainstream venues, which include Broadway, Off-Broadway, and regional theaters. The only way their plays could be staged was through multicultural programming, and Asian American playwrights slowly found opportunities to write for a wider audience, albeit in a limited way.

The question of what the word *wider* means in the phrase "wider audience" was a central question that vexed second-wave Asian American playwrights. For Velina Hasu Houston, "wider" and "whiter" were synonymous.⁴ Despite being advised by her teacher to write for a "wider" audience, Houston chose to write about her own specific experience of growing up with a Japanese mother and an American father of African American and Native American ancestry in Junction City, Kansas, at a segregated army base for multiracial families. Her play *Tea* is based on interviews she conducted with her mother and other Japanese wives of American GIs at the base. In the play, four friends gather to have tea and to commemorate a mutual friend who committed suicide. During their conversation, they share stories of suffering, joy, and hopes of living as Japanese women in the United States. Houston initially had difficulty finding interest in her plays at both Asian American theater and African American play companies. Within the construct of multicultural theater, her plays were not Asian American enough and not African American enough.⁵ Houston was, instead, welcomed by companies that promoted feminist and women issues, and *Tea* has become one of the most revived Asian American plays for both Asian American and "wider" audiences.

The Japanese American playwright Philip Kan Gotanda has described his playwriting process as a negotiation between the specific and the universal. He has stated in an interview, "I come from a specific place as a Japanese-American, but I want to make sure audiences can meet me halfway. When you want to reach a lot of people, your work should be inclusive enough for everyone to find its center."⁶ For Gotanda, his central place is the Japanese American experience that has been haunted by the trauma of the internment camps and the subsequent silence of the community. A Sansei growing up in Stockton, California, Gotanda had questions about the camps, but he found the Nisei generation unable and unwilling to disclose the past. All of his plays dramatize characters whose subconscious minds continue to be affected by the

unspeakable experience of racism and disenfranchisement exemplified most prominently by the internment of Japanese Americans.

In Gotanda's play *The Wind Cries Mary* (2004), the protagonist, Mary, finds herself unable to adapt to the fast changing culture of the 1960s. A daughter of an affluent Japanese American businessman, she vowed to become "American." She declares in the first scene, "I *am* American, goddamnit!"⁷⁷ She is married to a white man and rejects anything Japanese, but her desperate attempt to assimilate backfires when her former Japanese American lover emerges as a leader of the Asian American movement. The play ends tragically for both Mary and the lover. Gotanda's plays require audiences to confront the complex history of race and power in the United States while celebrating the tenacity of the human spirit. At its core, Gotanda's plays are about how characters live (or fail to live) with life's bitterness – whether it is the internment camp, the death of a child, or the betrayal of a lover. Gotanda's portrayal of broken and bitter characters is always sympathetic and nuanced. They may be quintessentially Japanese American characters with the deep trauma of the internment camps, but they are also familiar characters that represent the contemporary American experience.

Writing for a "wider audience" in theater has often meant writing plays featuring white male protagonists, and Asian American playwrights have had to ask whether they could write such a play and what that play would be like. Gotanda's answer to that question can be found in *Under the Rainbow* (2005), which includes two one-act plays, *Natalie Wood Is Dead* and *White Manifesto and Other Perfumed Tales of Self-Entitlement, or, Got Rice?* A white male character appears in the first piece as an imaginary person who lives in the minds of the Japanese American women, the main characters of the play. In the second piece, the white male is the protagonist who spews out his sexist and racist views of Asian women. By complementing the two plays, Gotanda has the female characters and the white male characters mirroring each other to reveal the complexities of their relationship.

David Henry Hwang's play *M. Butterfly* (1998) is the most famous Asian American play and Hwang's most commercially successful play. It should be underscored that the play features a white male protagonist. Loosely based on a true story, the play takes place in China during the 1960s at the height of the Vietnam War. Gallimard, the protagonist, is a French diplomat who has a long-term romantic relationship with a Chinese opera singer, Song, whom he believes to be a woman. The opera singer turns out to be a man and a spy working for the Chinese Communist Party. Song deceives Gallimard by playing the role of the perfect "Butterfly" or the submissive "Oriental"

woman dramatized in Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly*. Hwang's *M. Butterfly* explores the intersections of race, gender, and imperialism, and dramatizes the East-West relationship through the two main characters.

For David Henry Hwang, the dramatic form of a play is as important as the story it tells. He has experimented extensively with how the form of the stage should be used to represent the world of the play. For his Chinese Trilogy, for instance, he emulates the style and form of Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, Frank Chin's *Gee Pop!*, and Sam Shepard's plays. From the three writers, Hwang has borrowed the style of magic realism in which mythic characters coexist with realistic characters in the diegetic world of the play. While he has looked to other writers for new forms of playwriting, Hwang has, in turn, been recognized for creating his own form of Chinese American theater. Early in his career, he worked with the actor John Lone, who is a professionally trained Chinese opera performer. Lone taught Hwang about Chinese theater, and the collaboration between the two has deeply affected Hwang's development as a playwright. Many of Hwang's plays feature Chinese opera as both a form and a theme: in *FOB* (1979), Grace and Steve who embody the mythic figures Fa Mulan and Gwan Gung, respectively, battle each other in Cantonese opera style, and in *Kung Fu* (2014), a biographical play based on Bruce Lee, Chinese opera is used to represent Lee's troubled relationship with his father. Hwang's style of Chinese American theater incorporates the physicality of Chinese opera with American realism.

The vast majority of plays by second-wave Asian American playwrights do not borrow from traditional Asian theater, and the wave is partly defined by the writers' ability to use a wide range of dramatic styles and forms. Such range can be observed in the plays produced and published in the 1990s, during which six collections of Asian American plays were published.⁸ Additionally, plays by Philip Kan Gotanda and David Henry Hwang were published both individually and as collections during the decade.⁹ There are a number of reasons for the sudden surge in publications of Asian American plays during the 1990s. For one, the international popularity of David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* generated interest in other Asian American plays, and Asian American theater companies such as the East West Players and Pan Asian Repertory Theatre grew noticeably both in size and in the range of plays they produced. Moreover, mainstream theaters increasingly included Asian American plays during their seasons. Indeed, the plays published during the 1990s accurately represent the creative output of second-wave Asian American playwrights.

Two of the six anthologies published during the 1990s are devoted to plays by women writers: Roberta Uno's *Unbroken Thread* and Velina Hasu

Houston's *Politics of Life*. Both anthologies feature plays written by first-wave and second-wave playwrights. Uno and Houston have been instrumental in supporting Asian American women playwrights, who have been overshadowed by the success of male playwrights such as Hwang and Gotanda. In 1993, Uno established the Roberta Uno Asian American Women Playwrights Scripts Collection, 1924–2002, which is archived at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. The collection includes original scripts, many of which have not been produced or published. The plays featured in the anthologies dramatize topics that are significant to the construction of both womanhood and Asian Americanness. For instance, Jeannie Barroga's *Walls* (1989), which is included in Uno's anthology, is about Maya Lin's design of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. Barroga explores Lin's position as a Chinese American architect caught in the controversy over her design. As an Asian American woman, Lin is not considered by the veterans to be qualified to represent their experience of the war. Barroga uses the metaphor of walls to dramatize how Americans are divided through racism, sexism, and politics. On a macrolevel, the play is about the lasting social impact of the Vietnam War, and on a microlevel, the play dramatizes the details of individual lives and relationships.

Genny Lim's *Paper Angels* (1978) also dramatizes an actual historical moment while exploring the toll it has on individuals. Set in 1915, the play is about Chinese detainees on Angel Island off the coast of San Francisco. Based on Lim's research of the poems carved on the walls of the detention center, the play showcases archetypal characters from Chinese immigration history. Lum is an ambitious young Chinese man eager to pursue his American dream while Chin Gung is an "old timer" who is only too familiar with racism in the United States. Together, the characters in the play portray the hopes and disappointments of Chinese immigrants and what they had to endure to arrive in the United States. The play shows what Roberta Uno calls "the impressionistic sensibility" of the playwright in dramatizing the history of Angel Island.¹⁰ The structure of the play is similar to that of Barroga's *Walls* in that the scenes move between time and space fluidly.

History continued to be an important topic for Asian American playwrights throughout the 1980s and 1990s, but, unlike the first-wave writers, the second-wave writers wrote about historical moments they had not directly experienced. As exemplified by Genny Lim and Jeannie Barroga, Asian American playwrights increasingly wrote about nonautobiographical yet personally relevant topics. Elizabeth Wong's play *China Doll* (1996), for instance, is about the Chinese American actress Anna May Wong and the stereotypes

of Asian women that have been pervasive throughout the twentieth century. Elizabeth Wong comments on such stereotypes by using Anna May Wong as an emblematic figure who succeeded in her career despite racism in the American film industry.

Whereas first-wave playwrights began playwriting without formal training in the craft, the majority of second-wave playwrights had opportunities to work with playwriting teachers and to develop their plays in workshops sponsored by theater companies. Such opportunities meant that the playwrights could revise their drafts during many phases of the scripts' development. Such detailed fine-tuning has also led the playwrights to focus more on the tone and the mood of the play. Gotanda articulates this approach in his description of his play *Ballad of Yachiyo*: "All pieces try to say something, do something, leave the audience with something. This one for me was different. It wasn't about politics, the tyranny of our cultural mores, the tragic death of my blood relation, or even about constructing the perfect play, though all were important considerations. Rather this one for me was all about tone."¹¹ The creation of tone and mood onstage is accomplished by many production elements, including setting, lighting, costume, music, and sound. For playwrights, the use of silence and movement also function as indispensable tools for creating emotional affects for the audience. Indeed, what is not said by a character is often more important than what he or she says out loud.

During the 1980s and 1990s, solo performance emerged as a major genre of Asian American drama. Solo performances are often written and performed by the individual performer, and it is rare to see them revived or reenacted by another performer. However, the written scripts of the solo performances have been included in published anthologies, and they have been a major influence on the development of contemporary Asian American drama. In *Asian American Drama* edited by Brian Nelson, Amy Hill's *Tokyo Bound* and Denise Uyehara's *Hiro* are included. Both pieces are solo performances that describe the performer's experience autobiographically. In a typical solo performance piece, the performer narrates her story in first-person voice and often embodies other characters for dramatic effect. Most solo performances are about self-discovery and negotiation with the outside world. Some of the major Asian American solo performers include Dan Kwong, Denise Uyehara, Sandra Tsign Loh, lê thi diem thúy, Shishir Kurup, and Brenda Wong Aoki. Dan Kwong, who is perhaps the most well-known Asian American solo performer, always writes and performs stories that are autobiographical. For example, he has performed stories about growing up as a Japanese-Chinese-American

with a Nisei mother and a Chinese American father. In *Secrets of Samurai Centerfield* (1989), he uses dance and storytelling to explore what it means to be an American of multiethnic and multicultural heritage. In the piece, the samurai sword and the baseball bat converge as a new metaphor for his life in the United States.

Multimedia performance was also instrumental in the development of Asian American drama in the 1980s and 1990s. In particular, Ping Chong and Jessica Hagedorn led prolific careers by creating numerous multimedia works that included projection, film, dance, music, art installation, and performance art. While language and dialogues are less significant in multimedia pieces than in straight plays, many of them have been published in script format. Notably, the first anthology of Asian American drama, *Between Worlds: Contemporary Asian-American Drama* (1990) edited by Misha Berson features Ping Chong's *Nuit Blanche: A Select View of Earthlings* and Jessica Hagedorn's *Tenement Lover: no palmtrees/in new york city*. Both are highly visual multimedia works, and the scripts do not do justice to the actual performance. However, the fact that they have been published as part of Asian American drama underscores the need to examine them as both poetry and dramatic literature.

Version 3.0: The Third Wave

Version 3.0: Contemporary Asian American Plays is the title of Chay Yew's edited anthology published in 2011.¹² In his foreword to the anthology, David Henry Hwang declares that third-wave playwrights "have expanded the world of Asian American theatre." He continues, "My generation, so close to the birth of Asian America, sometimes saw it as the key to the riddle of our identity: I am Asian American, therefore I am. Third wave writers, who grew up taking the idea for granted, regard ethnicity as simply one piece in a much more complicated mosaic of identity."¹³ Hwang's statement accurately describes the general characteristics of third-wave Asian American playwrights. As defined by Hwang and Yew, the third-wave writers are of a younger generation, and they did not directly experience the emergence of Asian American identity in the 1960s and 1970s. Some of them grew up learning about the Asian American movement and immigration history while others had no contact with an Asian American community.

Starting in the late 1990s, third-wave playwrights began to debut in theater in large numbers. Playwrights such as Sung Rno, Diana Son, Ralph Peña, Han Ong, Alice Tuan, Prince Gomovilla, Chay Yew, Julia Cho, and Lloyd Suh have had their plays produced at both Asian American and mainstream venues.

Their plays have been published as both individual plays and in anthologies. One significant trend during the time was the increase in the diversity of ethnicity among Asian American playwrights. First-wave and second-wave playwrights were mostly Chinese and Japanese Americans, but more writers of different ethnic backgrounds began to write for theater. Moreover, some playwrights also worked as directors and producers of ethnic-specific theater companies and workshops. Ralph Peña, who is Filipino American, cofounded the Ma-Yi Theater Company in New York City in 1989 with the purpose of promoting plays by Filipino Americans. He has been the artistic director and, in 1998, expanded the company's mission to include all Asian American plays. Its Ma-Yi Writers Lab, which was founded in 2004 by Sung Rno, has had great success in providing opportunities for emerging Asian American writers, and it has been the country's largest residency program for Asian American playwrights.

Ralph Peña's *Flipzoids* (1996) was a defining production for Ma-Yi Theater Company, and it exemplifies the approach and style of third-wave playwrights.¹⁴ The play is about the Filipino American experience, and Peña uses three characters to dramatize what he saw as the immigrant experience of Filipinos in the United States. The title is a wordplay of "flip," which is derogatory term to label Filipino Americans, and "schizoid," a term to describe those with personality disorder. In the play, Aying is the mother of Vangie, who emigrated from the Philippines to the United States to work as a nurse. While Aying longs to "touch" her homeland, Vangie does everything in her power to assimilate as an American. Aying spends her days on a beach of Southern California where she meets Redford, a confused young man who talks to strangers in public bathrooms. Aying and Redford form a bond as he learns about their ancestral home and as she is kept company during her dying days. Redford is characterized as gay, which worsens his confused state of existence. The way Peña approaches issues of Filipino American identity is not didactic or overly political; rather, he juxtaposes many different representations of home and belonging. On the surface, the play is about Filipino Americans and their diaspora history, but on a deeper level, it is about sin and salvation. By sharing stories of the Philippines and remembering home, Aying saves Redford from his dangerous way of living, and Redford helps Aying perform the ritual of purification before her life comes to an end.

For third-wave writers, issues of ethnic and racial identities converge with existential questions of the human condition. The questions of "who am I" and "why am I here" may be answered in terms of immigration history and hyphenated identities, but they are also addressed as broader philosophical

questions. The increase in globalization and transnationalism has also contributed to the expanded application of ethnic identities in exploring the human condition. In their plays, the diasporic condition of displacement and lost identity is the primary human condition of the late twentieth century and the early twenty-first century.

Cleveland Raining (1995) by the Korean American playwright Sung Rno best illustrates the diasporic condition frequently dramatized by third-wave Asian American playwrights. Rno wrote the play while he was a student of Paula Vogel at Brown University's creative writing program. It premiered at the East West Players in 1995 and was considered by many as one of the best representations of the third wave at the company. The play is set in the Midwest, which is not common in Asian American drama. Described by Rno as surreal tragic-comedy, *Cleveland Raining* is about Jimmy "Rodin" Kim and Mari Kim who are siblings living in a countryside in Ohio. Their parents have left without explanation, but Mari is convinced that she could find her father if she drove endlessly on the interstate highway. Jimmy believes that the great flood is coming and prepares to escape the disaster on the Volkswagen bug, which he converts into an ark with the help of Mick, a white Ohioan mechanic. He tells Mick that the car engine should run on "emotional loss." Jimmy sleeps in the car and eats kimchi and drinks beer while waiting for rain. The play ends with Mari discovering in the backyard a painting by her mother, who was a painter. Jimmy puts the painting in the car engine, which then "roars to life, glowing with a surreal and bright light."¹⁵

Rno describes the setting as "fluid, ephemeral, barely real," and the only real object onstage is the Volkswagen. Similar descriptions of setting can be found in other plays by third-wave playwrights. The stage is used not as a metaphorical mirror to reflect reality, but rather it is a space to explore embodiment and presence of Asian Americans. Put in another way, the stage functions as a laboratory for both the performers and spectators to investigate the conditions of being humans and Asian Americans.

Instead of using realism as a dramatic style to represent a sense of authenticity or "real" Asian American experience, the third-wave writers have preferred nonrealistic forms to explore their characters and stories. In their plays, what is real or unreal do not get distinguished, and time does not move linearly. In Alice Tuan's *Last of the Suns* (1994), the grandfather character, Yeh Yeh, sees and hears characters from both Chinese mythology and his past. While one can guess that the Yeh Yeh's mind is overrun by his failing memory, Tuan does not make an explicit distinction between the figments of his mind and what actually happens onstage. In fact, Tuan deliberately integrates the two worlds

to enhance the dramatic conflict. Similarly, Sunil Kuruvilla's *Rice Boy* (2000) dramatizes two different worlds to coexist onstage. He describes the setting in detail to underscore the importance of such coexistence: "1975. Canada and India. Both places exist on stage simultaneously, with scene shifts indicated quickly by light and sound (not by set changes). At times, the sounds of the countries mix – we hear the Nut Seller's sad call in India blend with the winter gusts of Canada."¹⁶ In the play, the physical simultaneity of different scenes is central in depicting the diasporic experience of the main characters. The play is about Tommy, a twelve-year-old boy who grew up in a city in Ontario, Canada, with his father who could never fully adapt to the new country. Tommy's mother drowned ten years earlier when they were still in their native India. The play interweaves Tommy's memories of his recent trip to India and his efforts to find a "normal" Canadian family that might adopt him. In particular, he remembers his seventeen-year-old cousin Tina, who is paraplegic and spends her days making *kolam*, intricate and decorative patterns made on the floor with rice flour. Tommy's memories coexist with the bleak and cold reality of his life in Canada as he contemplates where he belongs and what he should do with his life.

Nonconventional use of language is another significant feature of third-wave playwrights. In Chay Yew's *A Language of Their Own* (1996), the characters, Oscar and Ming, are defined by how they speak English. They speak through a series of monologues and dialogues, and their conversations transcend time. The script can be interpreted as a collective stream of consciousness of the two Asian gay lovers who are caught in a fraught relationship. Oscar is HIV-positive and breaks up with Ming, and both struggle with being Asian and gay. They often speak directly to the audience, and how they speak to each other is as important as what they say. In the play, dialogues weave in and out of present and past moments, and words are more important than action. It is through language and poetry that Yew creates the intimate world of love, betrayal, and human connection.

In Han Ong's *Swoony Planet* (1997), characters speak in short sentences and phrases that often overlap with each other's lines. The lines in the play are written in verse form with minimal explanation of what the characters are thinking. This means that the intention of the characters must be interpreted by the actor and the director with detailed attention to the beat and flow of language. What is said becomes verbal choreography of thoughts that are not always continuous or logical. In one of the stage directions, Ong has two characters – Artie and a man he imagines to be his father – speak while moving their bodies in a choreographed manner. Ong writes, "Each line they speak is

punctuated by an arm being fitted into a sleeve, leg into pants, buttons being buttoned, etc. – gestural, like dance.”¹⁷ In the subsequent dialogue, rhythm and tone capture the nuance of the interaction between the two characters. The man is not the father Artie is seeking, and the ill-fitting clothing that results from the “dance” symbolizes the mismatch.

The plays by third-wave Asian American playwrights reflect the overall trend in contemporary American drama, which emphasizes experimentation in form and social issues in content. Many American plays since the 1990s have been about politics of race, gender, and sexuality. This trend has made it imperative for Asian American playwrights to add their voice to the debates of American culture. Moreover, with the controversy surrounding the musical *Miss Saigon* in the early 1990s, casting once again became a central issue in theater, and Asian American playwrights responded by writing plays that could function as a vehicle for Asian American actors.¹⁸ Some, like the Korean American playwright Diana Son, wrote plays with characters that could be played by actors of any racial background. Her play, *Stop Kiss* (1998), is about two women – Callie and Sara – who fall in love, but when they kiss for the first time on a street in New York City, one of them gets assaulted by a bystander. The sequence of the scenes is structured in a way that the story is told in reverse: the play begins with the assaulted woman in a hospital and ends with the first kiss. Although Son did not write the characters with racial specificity, she has insisted on casting them with minority actors. In the premiere at the Public Theatre in New York City, the role of Sara was played by the Korean Canadian actress Sandra Oh, and a male character was played by Kevin Carroll, an African American actor.

In an interview, Son asks rhetorically, “Was *Stop Kiss* the Asian American play of the season at the Public Theater? Is it an Asian American play because I wrote it? Is it an Asian American play because Sandra Oh was in it? The dominant theme of the play was sexuality, sexual identity and committing and not ethnic identity. So I don’t know or care if it fulfills that [Asian] slot. I would think that they chose to produce *Stop Kiss* because it was a good play.”¹⁹ She has resisted being labeled Asian American or Korean American and has insisted in writing about anyone and anything. Son’s view of the labels is the same as the one held by David Henry Hwang and others in the 1980, but the mainstream success of her plays that are not about Asian American topics epitomizes a significant shift in Asian American theater. She expresses this sense of liberation when she comments that previous generation of Asian American playwrights needed to say, “We are here,” but her generation is saying, “We are weird.”²⁰

While New York City has been a central location for third-wave playwrights, other cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago, and the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul have been major sites for new Asian American plays. Additionally, the geographical locales of the plays' settings vary noticeably. The Korean American playwright Julia Cho, for instance, was born in Los Angeles and spent part of her childhood in Arizona, and the West Coast and the Southwest desert function prominently as settings and themes in her plays. In Cho's *BFE* (2005), a teenaged Korean American girl living in a suburb of the Southwest desert feels isolated and ugly, and she tries desperately to fit in. In Lloyd Suh's *American Hwangap* (2009), Texas is the setting for a dysfunctional family with a father who imagines himself to be a hero in a western movie.²¹

Plays published in *Asian American Plays for a New Generation* edited by Josephine Lee, Donald Eitel, and Rick Shiomi represent plays developed and produced in the Twin Cities, which Josephine Lee describes as a "hospitable home for new theatrical writing and production."²² In her introduction to the anthology, Lee articulates the critical significance of examining Asian American drama in a wider geographical landscape. She writes, "Moving away from a bicoastal Asian America suggests more broadly how Asian American experience never has had a real center. Instead, it is a mass of changing relationships among often quite disparate individuals and groups, whose sense of self, community, and home must be renegotiated time and again."²³ Moreover, the Twin Cities has a large Korean adoptee population, and the anthology features *Walleye Kid: The Musical*, which is about the adoptees' experience in the American Midwest.

The Next Wave: Into the Twenty-First Century

In the twenty-first century, Asian American playwrights have increasingly found inspiration in popular culture, avant-garde performance, social media, and the effects of globalization. The Vietnamese-American playwright Qui Nguyen describes himself as a "playwright, screenwriter, and geek," and he cofounded Vampire Cowboys, a theater company in New York City. He calls the company "geek theatre," and, according to its website, it is "the only professional theatre organization to be officially sponsored by NY Comic Con."²⁴ His play *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G* (2012) is a meta-theatrical comedy about a character named Playwright who is kidnapped by his main character to finish the story he has been avoiding for ten years. The play features David Henry Hwang as a character, and Nguyen and Ma-Yi Theater Company produced three YouTube video episodes to

promote the play. In the videos, Hwang makes a cameo appearance as a famous yet disgruntled playwright.²⁵

The Internet and social media have become an essential tool for Asian American playwrights to advertise and share their plays. In the case of Young Jean Lee, she has used social media to write her play. She would, for example, solicit ideas and examples on her Facebook page and include them in her new play. A Korean American, Young Jean Lee is a playwright and director who has recently emerged as one of the most exciting American theater artists of her generation. She is recognized as an experimental playwright who has written about various topics in ways that many consider subversive and avant-garde. Charles Isherwood of *The New York Times* has called her “hands down, the most adventurous downtown playwright of her generation.”²⁶ Lee, however, did not emerge from Asian American theater. Rather, she founded her own theater company, Young Jean Lee’s Theater Company, and has created works that defy convention and expectations of contemporary theater. *Songs of Dragons Flying to Heaven* (2006) is Lee’s only play about Asian American identity, and it is a deconstructive parody of identity plays. She deliberately makes the play fail at the end by sabotaging it with two boring white characters.²⁷

The future of Asian American drama will include more writers like Qui Nguyen and Young Jean Lee. It will also see a growing number of playwrights with multiracial identity. Playwrights such as Naomi Iizuka and Rajiv Joseph are award-winning writers with parents of Asian and non-Asian descent. While they do not identify themselves singularly as Asian American, their plays have dramatized issues of identity, race, and cultural belonging. For instance, Naomi Iizuka’s *36 Views* (2003) is about Orientalism and cultural authenticity, and Rajiv Joseph’s Pulitzer Prize-nominated *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* (2009) is about the U.S. involvement in the Middle East. Joseph’s *The North Pool* (2011) addresses the experiences of an Arab American student in an American high school. Almost fifty years have passed since the first playwriting competition sponsored by the East West Players. In those years, Asian American drama grew from virtually nonexistent to becoming established as a major part of American theater and literature. In the beginning decades of the twenty-first century, Asian American playwrights continue to explore both familiar and new issues of Asian American identity and history. At the same time, a number of them have written about topics that have nothing to do with Asian America. Asian American plays can be seen in multiple cities in the country, and the range of genres, styles, and topics varies as widely as the growing diversity of Asian Americans.

Whether a fourth wave has to be defined is yet to be seen, but the first-, second-, and third-wave playwrights continue to write and to exert their influence on American theater.

Notes

- 1 For a detailed history of the East West Players, see Yuko Kurahashi, *Asian American Culture on Stage: The History of the East West Players* (London: Routledge, 1999).
- 2 For a study on Chin's plays, see Josephine Lee, *Performing Asian America: Race and Ethnicity on the Contemporary Stage* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997).
- 3 Karen Shimakawa, *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).
- 4 Velina Hasu Houston, "Introduction," in *The Politics of Life: Four Plays by Asian American Women*, ed. Velina Hasu Houston (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 2.
- 5 For details of Houston's early career, see Esther Kim Lee, *A History of Asian American Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 146–54.
- 6 Misha Berson, "Role Model on a Role: Philip Kan Gotanda's Work Grabs Mainstream Attention and Inspires Younger Artists," *Seattle Times* (October 10, 1996): D1.
- 7 Philip Kan Gotanda, *The Wind Cries Mary in No More Cherry Blossoms: Sisters Matsumoto and Other Plays* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), 96.
- 8 The six anthologies are Misha Berson, ed., *Between Worlds: Contemporary Asian-American Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1990); Roberto Uno, ed., *Unbroken Thread: An Anthology of Plays by Asian American Women* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), Velina Hasu Houston, ed., *The Politics of Life and But Still, Like Air, I'll Rise* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997); Brian Nelson, ed., *Asian American Drama: Nine Plays from the Multiethnic Landscape* (New York: Applause, 1997); Alvin Eng, ed., *Tokens? The NYC Asian American Experience on Stage* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999).
- 9 Philip Kan Gotanda, *Fish Head Soup and Other Plays* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996) and David Henry Hwang, *FOB and Other Plays* (New York: Plume, 1990). For a more complete list, see the bibliography of Esther Kim Lee's *A History of Asian American Theatre*.
- 10 Uno, *Unbroken Thread*, 14.
- 11 Philip Kan Gotanda, *Ballad of Yachiyo* (New York City: Theatre Communications Group, 1997), 5.
- 12 Born in Singapore, Yew was the director of the Asian Theatre Workshop from ten years (1995–2005) at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. He has been a prolific playwright and recognized for his directing and producing. In 2011, he became the Artistic Director of Victory Gardens Theater in Chicago, which was the first time an Asian American was appointed the leader of a mainstream theater company.
- 13 David Henry Hwang, "Foreword," in *Version 3.0: Contemporary Asian American Plays*, ed. Chay Yew (New York City: Theatre Communications Group, 2011), xi.
- 14 *Flipzoids* is published in Alvin Eng, *Tokens? and Savage Stage: Plays by Ma-Yi Theater Company*, ed. Joi Barrios-Leblanc (New York: Ma-Yi Theater Company, 2007).
- 15 Sung Rno, *Cleveland Raining*, in Houston, *But Still, Like Air, I'll Rise*, 260.

- 16 Sunil Kuruvilla, *Rice Boy*, in Yew, *Version 3.0*, 469. A Canadian of East Indian descent, Kuruvilla wrote the play as an MFA playwriting student at Yale School of Drama. *Rice Boy* is one of the most produced South Asian American plays in the United States and Canada.
- 17 Han Ong, *Swoony Planet*, in Yew, *Version 3.0*, 214.
- 18 Asian American actors protested the casting of a white actor in yellow-face makeup in the role of a Eurasian character. For details of the controversy, see chapter 7 of Esther Kim Lee's *A History of Asian American Theatre*.
- 19 Alvin Eng, *Tokens?*, 439.
- 20 Ibid., 415. Diana Son has indeed broaden her writing opportunities in and out of theater, and she has also worked as a television producer and writer on shows such as "The West Wing," "Law and Order: Criminal Intent," and "Blue Bloods."
- 21 Lloyd Suh's *American Hwangapis* published in *Seven Contemporary Plays from the Korean Diaspora*, ed. Esther Kim Lee (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).
- 22 Josephine Lee, Donald Eitel, and Rick Shiomi, eds., *Asian American Plays for a New Generation: Plays for a New Generation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 5.
- 23 Ibid., 5–6.
- 24 Online resource: <http://quinguyen.com/bio.html> (accessed August 14, 2014).
- 25 Online resource: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lmsCxXBzHQ8> (accessed August 14, 2014).
- 26 Charles Isherwood, "Beneath Pink Parasols, Identity in Stark Form," *The New York Times* (January 16, 2012). Online resource: <http://theater.nytimes.com/2012/01/17/theater/reviews/young-jean-lees-untitled-feminist-show-review.html> (accessed July 14, 2012).
- 27 For studies on Young Jean Lee's play, see Karen Shimakawa, "Young Jean Lee's Ugly Feelings about Race and Gender," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 17.1 (March 2007): 89–102 and Esther Kim Lee, "Asian American Women Playwrights and the Dilemma of the Identity Play: Staging Heterotopic Subjectivities," in *Contemporary Women Playwrights: Into the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Penny Farfan and Lesley Ferris (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

“More Than You Ever Knew You Knew”: The Rising Prestige of Fiction

TINA CHEN

“You always write something much more than you ever knew you knew.”

– Gish Jen

In 1968, students and others at San Francisco State University participated in the longest student strike in U.S. history, working in coalition to demand a redefinition of higher education. In advocating for the creation of a department of ethnic studies, strikers were crucially aware of the relationship between representation and oppression. Arguing that equity for the disempowered and underrepresented could never be achieved without radically changing curricular structures and that self-determination was key to making such changes possible, those early protestors articulated a foundational premise making conceivable the subsequent institutionalization of ethnic studies. The contemporary prominence of Asian American fiction – which has appeared on bestseller lists, been awarded prizes and accolades, and been adopted into curricula – can only be conceptualized in relation to the shifts in consciousness and tactics embraced during the identity and protest movements of the late 1960s and 1970s, a tangible post-civil rights gain. Interestingly, despite a literary imagination – an imagination capable of questioning the nature of a just society, an imagination uniquely suited for reshaping public life, as Martha Nussbaum has argued – always being a significant aspect of the activism transforming those decades, Asian American fiction has historically occupied a less prominent position than other forms and genres, such as poetry, memoir, and drama.¹

Writing this chapter forty-five years later, it is impossible not to be struck by the visibility and vitality of Asian American fiction. Taking the National Book Award as an imperfect but rough example, in 2013 three Asian American writers were named as finalists for the prestigious award: Jhumpa Lahiri for *The Lowland*, Gene Luen Yang for *Boxers and Saints*, and Cynthia Kadohata for *The Thing about Luck*. Notably, Asian American fiction was represented both

in front of and behind the scenes: in addition to Cynthia Kadohata's lyrical meditation about family, life challenges, and bad fortune winning the Young People's Literature Award, Gish Jen was one of the judges for the Fiction Award. Such recognition, coupled with a story about President Obama celebrating Small Business Saturday just a month later by buying books – his choices including Lahiri's novel as well as Julie Otsuka's PEN/Faulkner award-winning *The Buddha in the Attic*, itself a finalist for the NBA Fiction Award in 2011 – seems to herald the definitive arrival of Asian American fiction to the mainstream commercial literature scene.

And yet, I hesitate at the notion of definitive arrival, seductive as that idea might be in its evocation of accomplishment and success. In many ways, this chapter's subtitle – the rising prestige of fiction – can mislead by implying that there is a singular tale to be told about the ascendance of Asian American fiction, or that the narrative is developmental in its unfolding. As authors like Karen Tei Yamashita and Julie Otsuka have explored in their writing, the challenge of narrating the diverse collective experiences of Asian America often requires serious attention to formal experimentation designed to resist totalization. Specifically, Yamashita and Otsuka are attuned to the fragmentation and diversity that undergird any master narrative, careful to avoid reinscribing new comprehensive mythologies of “the Asian American experience” or “Asian American literature.” In *I-Hotel* (2010), Yamashita tells the story of a critical decade in Asian American history – the book begins in 1968 and ends in 1977 – but her recognition of the multiple centers and protagonists of “the movement” commits her to a prismatic, palimpsestic collation of ten novellas, each written in a distinctive style and tone. Otsuka's wildly different *The Buddha in the Attic* (2011), a spare tale of Japanese “picture bride” experiences, is written in the collective pronoun, its insistence on the narrating “we” both remarkably committed to and radically disruptive of the possibility, and impossibility, of subsuming individual stories into a single master narrative. Taking to heart these examples of how to resist the temptation to organize neatly the myriad reasons for the increasing stature of Asian American fiction into a too-easily-digestible story, I begin this chapter by offering a set of contexts for understanding the visibility of contemporary Asian American fiction. By framing these multiple contextualizing narratives in terms of demographics, institutionalization, prizes, and the relation between ethics and multiculturalism, we will see that there is more than one way to tell this tale. In the second half of the chapter, I highlight some of the formal features of contemporary Asian American fiction – its tensile recognition of the power of convention even as it strives to tell recognizably different stories; its insistence

on the mutual imbrication between aesthetics and politics; its refusal to define itself strictly in terms of racial and ethnic identity labels; and its simultaneous embrace and rejection of ethnic literature's pedagogical promise – in an effort to further develop answers to the question of why Asian American fiction has become so commercially successful and lauded.

No Single Story: Proliferating Versions of the Tales We Could Tell

In one version of the story, the answer to this question derives from changing immigration patterns. In his study *The Children of 1965: On Writing, and Not Writing, as an Asian American*, Min Hyoung Song argues that to “call attention to the significance of the 1965 immigration act for Asian Americans is one way to foreground the sense of emergence that surrounds an Asian American mainstream within an American mainstream.”² Identifying the critical import of the immigration laws that substantially increased the number of Asians in America as well as transformed the demographics of the population – particularly with regard to nativity, ethnicity, geography, class, gender, and family structures – Song highlights the ways in which the “sense of emergence” characterizing the mainstreaming of Asian American fiction, an arrival signaled by the success of Chang-rae Lee’s generic fusion of the spy story and the ethnic narrative in *Native Speaker* (1995), is historically contingent. The unprecedented proliferation of Asian American fiction in the wake of Lee’s novel can be theorized directly in relation to the notion of an emerging critical mass of Asian American writers even as Song cautions against seeing such historical contingency as leading toward a developmental outcome. Rather, Song argues it is emblemized in the literature as a continual renewal, an ongoing sense of *becoming* that resists prescription. Significantly, this formulation identifies one possible answer to the question about the reasons for contemporary Asian American fiction’s commercial success – the cultural and class impact of demographic change in the Asian American population – even as it argues against totalizing such an answer.

In another version of this story, we might look to the institutionalization of Asian American studies for an answer, in this way directly tying the rise of Asian American fiction to the protest movements creating ethnic studies as a recognized field of knowledge production. In his analysis of the fundamental dynamics driving the field’s institutionalization, Mark Chiang uses the seminal work of Pierre Bourdieu to trace the intellectual and cultural mechanisms whereby political capital is converted into cultural capital. As

Chiang demonstrates, “the construction of a minority literary field” serves as a key site for the legitimating and credentializing processes necessary to create cultural capital.³ By asking what it means to think about literature as a form of cultural capital fundamental to the establishment of Asian American studies as a field of knowledge production, Chiang encourages us to see the links between professional literary studies and the promotion of a product – Asian American literature – designed simultaneously to herald and make possible the transmission of political capital, which is ultimately the capital of representation. One of the most interesting twists in this rendition is the inversion of the relationship between commercial failure and authenticity.

If the early cultural nationalist manifestos about Asian American literature insisted that commercial success is a mechanism of white domination, an argument made most vociferously by Frank Chin and Jeffrey Paul Chan in their formulation of “racist love” and in Chin’s introduction to one of the foundational texts of Asian American literature, the *Aiiiiieee!* anthology, the institutionalization of Asian American literary studies has triggered the recalibration of the nature of that relationship by instead arguing that commercial success is one result of the diversification of American literature promoted by the rise of multiculturalism. Critically, such an argument continues to differentiate between commercial success, literary accomplishment, and critical import rather than understanding these to be always equivalent. To illustrate: the phenomenal public reception to Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) – on the *New York Times* Best Seller list for seventy-five weeks and nominated for both the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award – has made the book a continued presence in the commercial literary scene even as Tan’s novel has not been embraced in correspondingly uniform ways in critical and academic contexts. Sau-ling Wong noted in an early essay on Tan’s success that even as *The Joy Luck Club* fulfills a demand created by curricular diversification for “fairly accessible ethnic works,” it remained less clear if the book would establish a lasting position in the “‘Asian American’ canon, the one arising from contestations within the [critical academic] community.”⁴ This turned out to be a prescient prediction. Such disjunction illustrates the ways in which Asian American literary studies constitutes an important but by no means singular influence in the simultaneous consolidation and diversification of cultural capital in the form of Asian American fiction, a product that has proven quite marketable to the mainstream reading public.

Yet a third story that could be told here dovetails with the one James F. English details in his cultural study of prizes for literature and the arts in the twentieth century. English argues that the “stunning rise” of prizes and awards

reflects the ways in which they operate to produce, establish, and solidify prestige, which he defines as “cultural status.”⁵ Cultural status is a kind of symbolic capital that is both tied to and differentiated from economic capital. Literary prizes are society’s “most effective institutional agents of *capital intra-conversion*.”⁶ Specifically, English means here the unique ability of the prize to move between – and produce – different types of capital. Like Chiang, English depends heavily upon the work of Bourdieu to theorize the processes by which cultural capital becomes a mechanism for the maintaining or alteration of social distributions of power. Accordingly, the twinned prominence of prizes in U.S. culture and Asian American fiction in the awarding of those prizes suggests a particular kind of intersectionality between the producers of the culture industry and the intelligentsia in the creation of Asian American fiction as cultural capital. If prestige serves as the economy for recognizing literary value, then the fact that Asian American fiction has been nominated for and has regularly won the most celebrated and recognized literary awards given to American writers – including the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, the PEN/Faulkner, and the PEN/Hemingway – signals both the reason for and the recognition of Asian American literary success in fiction.

Given this, one of the ways to tell this version of the story of contemporary Asian American fiction is to rehearse the moments when literary prizes punctuate or transform the notion of what such literature can and does mean. In this regard, three specific occasions come to mind: Robert Olen Butler winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1993 for *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*, the award controversy surrounding the eventual withdrawal of the Association for Asian American Studies’ Fiction Award to Lois-Ann Yamanaka for *Blu’s Hanging* in 1998, and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Interpreter of Maladies* winning both the Pulitzer Prize and the PEN/Hemingway Award in 2000. Beyond the recognition of literary value they connote, prizes mark the ways in which the celebration of Asian American fiction correlates to significant social and historical contexts making possible its emergence and appreciation. Butler’s *Good Scent* (1992) is a collection of short stories written in the first-person voices of fifteen Vietnamese Americans. Heralded in the popular press as a tour-de-force literary accomplishment, one that “make[s] the lives of these people real, inform[s] us of their concerns and gives us a much-needed understanding of their culture,” *Good Scent* raises interesting issues regarding the visibility and definition of Asian American fiction.⁷ Monique Truong, herself an acclaimed fiction writer, has critiqued Butler, a white author, for his act of “literary ventriloquism” – an admiring

phrase she initially comes across in a review of the book but that she deftly re-marks in her scathing assessment of both *Good Scent's* literary accomplishments and the critical establishment's lack of attention to the problems raised by this kind of "yellowface" performance.⁸ Butler's collection was praised for bringing into visibility "a world that has been, until now, largely invisible to us" (Passaro 66), in the process raising questions for Truong and others, if not the mainstream literary establishment, of what counts as Asian American literature and whether or not such literature should be evaluated in terms of its literary accomplishment or its ability to convey the "authenticity" of a culture.⁹

Such conflict regarding the evaluative criteria used to determine the success and accomplishment of Asian American fiction was spotlighted, albeit in slightly different terms, when the Association for Asian American Studies first bestowed and then rescinded the association's Fiction Award for Yamanaka's *Blu's Hanging* (1998) after a number of conference attendees protested Yamanaka's negative depictions of Filipinos. In his thoughtful assessment of the historical and political circumstances of the awards debacle, Chiang notes that while "one side essentially argued that the book was stereotypical and therefore bad literature" and "the other side argued that the book was good literature and therefore could not be stereotypical," these are actually "not symmetrical arguments."¹⁰ In a moment designed to recognize the literary accomplishment of Yamanaka's depiction of Hawai'i's multiethnic society, the divide between the professional literary establishment and the Asian American community, as well as the diversity of opinion *within* each of these populations, made it impossible to come to any agreement about Yamanaka's use of Filipino stereotypes. Perhaps ironically, this awards history moment figures crucially in highlighting the connections and disjunctions between the various forms of capital – political and cultural – that prizes are meant to negotiate even as it also reveals the competing bases – again, political and cultural – upon which the legitimacy of Asian American fiction depends.

While there was no similar controversy surrounding the *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) winning both the Pulitzer and the PEN/Hemingway, Jhumpa Lahiri's accomplishment certainly catapulted Asian American fiction into literary prominence. Her award subsequently opened the doors for more Asian American authors to be nominated for the Pulitzer (including Susan Choi, Ha Jin, and Chang-rae Lee) even as the relationship between South Asian American and Asian American literatures became an ongoing issue debated by Asian Americanists.¹¹ Collectively, then, prizes have become not simply a de facto mechanism for the bestowal of cultural prestige on Asian American

fiction but a critical vehicle for the debate, complication, and diversification of what counts as Asian American fiction and how it should be evaluated.

The fourth story, although by no means the last one that could be told, might be titled “the turn to Eth(n)ics” and would focus on the convergence between the renewed attention to ethics in literary study, the heightened scientific attention to the relationship between literature and moral instruction, and the assumption that ethnic American literature is particularly apt in performing a kind of generalizable pedagogical function for a multicultural – and even a postracial – society. In the 1990s and 2000s, literary studies turned increasingly to ethics in an effort to consider anew the connections between literature and the social conditions and imperatives influencing its creation and channeling its influence. By attending to the imagined specifics of literature, scholars made a case for the particular value of literature in cultivating a mode of understanding the nature of the ethical as a means of articulating or making possible principled action. Bolstering the assertions long made by humanists about the unique contributions literature makes to ethical articulation and development is contemporary scientific evidence about how literary fiction in particular can impact how individuals identify with and understand the subjective states of others, a concept known as “Theory of Mind” (which in the humanities we have often called by other names – imagination and sympathy, e.g.).¹²

Multiculturalism, whether conceptualized as pluralistic or particularistic in approach, in conjunction with these prevailing ideas, both humanistic and scientific, about literature’s efficacy for inculcating an ethical education has also provided a key context for renewed attention to and appreciation for ethnic American fiction. As Gregory S. Jay argued in an influential polemic in 1991, the expansion of the canon of “American” literature has usually meant the addition of “a few new texts or authors without dismantling the prejudicial framework which has traditionally prescribed the kinds of works studied in ‘American’ literature courses and the kinds of issues raised in ‘American’ literary scholarship.”¹³ Instead, Jay proposes a pedagogical approach that utilizes material that “*actively interferes* with each other’s experiences, languages, and values for their power to expand the horizon of the student’s cultural literacy to encompass people he or she has scarcely acknowledged as real.”¹⁴ Jay’s argument – although not framed in terms of the explicitly ethical – implicitly asserts the ethical bases for the use, inclusion, and pedagogical purpose of ethnic writing. Although these contentions are clearly informed by developments within the academy – poststructuralism, deconstruction, postmodernism, minority studies, and postcolonialism among them – it is critical to note

that such notions about the ethical promise of ethnic fiction have also been adopted relatively widely by a mainstream reading audience. Ironically, such widespread acceptance of and assumptions about the ethical training provided by Asian American and other kinds of ethnic fiction – training about expanding cultural horizons, understanding diverse social realities, and negotiating contact with people who are different than you – can actually hinder the promotion of social justice. As Jay notes, inclusion comes in many guises and the piecemeal adoption of ethnic fiction under the rubric of “American” literature has paradoxically encouraged us *not* to attend to the injustice, inequality, and oppressive nationalist ideology structuring how we teach such literature. Similarly, Jessie Alemán identifies the real world implications of such disjunction in the wake of 9/11, noting that “celebrations of transethnic border crossing” abruptly ended after the bombing of the World Trade Center in 2001, and were quickly replaced by the newest version of the historical dilemma confronting the writers of minority fiction: the need to refute popular notions of them as “aliens” and “foreigners.”¹⁵

Forms of Fiction, Fictional Forms

From a critical and theoretical perspective, these explanatory narratives – about changing demographics, professional institutionalization, the rise of literary prizes as a mechanism for intracapital conversion, and the complementarity of theories regarding literature’s ethical possibilities with the pedagogical injunctions of multiculturalism – all make good sense. Yet despite their plausibility as explanations for why Asian American fiction is more recognized now than ever before, they seem unsatisfactory, not so much wrong as only partially right. For more answers, then, we should look to the fiction.

While the reasons for Asian American fiction’s commercial and critical ascendance are multiple and contextual, much of it is also attributable to the qualities of the literature. In the rest of this chapter, I will focus on some of the characteristics of contemporary Asian American fiction that make it both marketable and critically esteemed. Although I am tempted here to construct a taxonomy of literary characteristics, such an effort seems reductive, leading to the stultification of the literature’s dynamism and energetic experimentation. Instead, then, I propose characterizing what follows in relation to the contextualizing narratives just traced as a conceptual topography. This provisional mapping identifies some (but by no means all) of the critical features of contemporary Asian American fiction, in an effort to figure out why fiction has become such a compelling field of cultural production. As I have

written elsewhere, topographies can usefully illuminate shared orientations, approaches, and political expressions while keeping in mind the variable conditions and contexts for such emergence.¹⁶

In Bharati Mukherjee's *The Holder of the World* (1993), the cultural contacts and conflicts between Puritan New England and Mughal India are visually recorded in a series of miniature paintings. In this retelling of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), the transgressive woman is an impossibility that nonetheless manages to appear in the records of history, if only one knows where to look. By looking carefully at a series of Mughal miniatures, the novel's narrator realizes the utter complexity depicted in each image: these are maps of cultural contact, certainly, but unlike cartographic maps, which often obscure as much as they reveal, these paintings are characterized by "no limit to extravagance, or to detail, that temperamentally cannot exclude, a miniature art forever expanding."¹⁷ As Manzanar Murakami reminds us in *Tropic of Orange*, "*there are maps and there are maps and there are maps.*"¹⁸ While contemporary Asian American fiction is extraordinarily diverse, it is a literature that balances innovation with tradition, particularly in its supple recognition of the power of convention even as it strives to tell recognizably different stories; its insistence on the mutual imbrication between the aesthetic and the politics; its refusal to define itself strictly in terms of racial and ethnic identity labels; and its simultaneous embrace and rejection of ethnic literature's pedagogical functions.

Betsy Huang contends that "the task of organizing Asian American literature has been made too easy by the genre constraints and imperatives that have restricted literary production to a narrow set of predictable themes and ideological positions" (146). Contemporary Asian American fiction has been very invested in reworking generic conventions even as it acknowledges the powerful interpretive sway that genre exerts – both as a typological category of the kind organizing different literary forms or as a biological category, as we might conceptualize the stories popularly understood as "ethnic fiction" or "immigrant fiction" to be. Whether through the practice of "genre mixing" (Derrida), "generic troubling" (Huang), "genre poaching" (Lukin), or "cumulative reuse" (Dimock), Asian American writers have emphasized the problems and possibilities of writing in ways that reinforce, exceed, subvert, or complicate the formal and thematic expectations contextualizing their literary production as Asian Americans. Accordingly, Asian American fiction regularly foregrounds the power of convention even as it strives to tell recognizably different stories, a recognition that often manifests as an intense

literary self-awareness that ideally inspires a corresponding level of reflexive understanding in the reader.¹⁹

Sometimes such self-awareness is embodied in the figure of a character who both is and is not the author, like the protagonists of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1975), Nam Le's *The Boat* (2009), or Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013). Equally often, writers employ a frame narrator to make the stakes of storytelling and the imperatives of convention unavoidably discernible. For example, Jessica Hagedorn's postmodern collage novel *Dogeaters* (1990) centers on the lives and dreams of diverse members of Filipino society; it expansively includes stories about wealthy patricians, mulatto prostitutes, beauty pageant winners, leftist guerrillas, political operatives, and movie stars. The novel's fractured narratives are written using a variety of popular cultural forms – including newspaper articles, television and radio shows, movie conventions, proselytizing tracts, and letters – thus emphasizing the seemingly inexorable sway of generic conventions in determining how and why certain stories are told, an emphasis that bears particular resonance given the novel's attention to the neocolonial dynamics influencing Filipino society. The sheer exuberance of what the novel contains is hard to corral, and Hagedorn does not try to unify the various strands of her narrative into a singular, cohesive story. Rather, she utilizes a frame narrator – Rio Gonzaga, the daughter of a wealthy family featured in the novel – whose reliability and trustworthiness is ultimately called into question by her admittedly biased cousin Pucha.

Much of this heightened awareness about reliability and narrative investments directly correlates to contemporary literature's postmodern attention to the metafictional, or fiction that calls attention to its representational techniques and knowledge claims. What Asian American fiction's exploration of the metafictional produces, though, is an epistemological challenge of a particular kind. Rather than simply interrogating the forms and questions structuring the story being told, Asian American fiction's use of metafiction becomes a means for renewing and reconfiguring the literature's political origins even as it also challenges the distinctions demarcating the aesthetic from the political. In other words, metafictional attention in contemporary Asian American fiction is always directed at social and political issues as well as to questions of form, suggesting that however much one might want to disarticulate politics from aesthetics, such disarticulation is intellectually and artistically problematic. As such, writers like Ruth Ozeki and Karen Tei Yamashita have been praised for both their literary craftsmanship as well as the ways in which their fiction has focused on some of the most pressing issues of our contemporary moment. In an interview with Ozeki, Eleanor Ty characterized

the author's first two novels, *My Year of Meats* (1998) and *All Over Creation* (2003), as "issues-based," noting that they tackled a plethora of concerns including "capitalism, hormone additives in meat, intercultural and racial tensions, the power of the media, cloning and genetic modification, infertility and globalization."²⁰ Similarly, both readers and critics have come to expect fiction by Karen Tei Yamashita to be forward looking and almost uncannily accurate in predicting pressing social and political issues concerning questions of sustainability and ethics. Her novels *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* (1990), *Brazil-Marú* (1992), *Tropic of Orange* (1997), and *I-Hotel* (2010) have collectively addressed a broad array of issues and concerns, including environmental pollution and catastrophe, immigration and transnationalism, globalization and capitalism, and the histories of the Asian American movement. These writers use their fictions to suggest that the choice between politics and aesthetics is a false one; as Yamashita has plaintively asked, "The artist may conjure possibility or another way to see or hear, but shouldn't this be the creative role of every thinking citizen?"²¹

Paradoxically, Asian American fiction has capitalized on its marketability by challenging the interpretive codes by which it has been defined. Indeed, critics of Asian American fiction have noticed that its authors often refuse to define their work strictly according to racial or ethnic identity labels, despite the demands of the literary marketplace and the historical contexts that initially pigeonholed Asian American literature into nonfictional genres such as autobiography and memoir. As Caroline Rody, Rajini Srikanth, and Min Hyoung Song have all noted, Asian American writers regularly experiment with the transgression of ethnic boundaries, decide to tell "unmarked" narratives, or create characters who disrupt the racial congruence between author and character expected from ethnic fiction, in the process contributing to what Ramón Saldívar has identified as a "postrace aesthetic."²² According to Saldívar, postrace aesthetics do not suggest that racism no longer exists or that race doesn't matter anymore. Instead, such aesthetics are intimately tied to a "post-postmodern, post-Civil Rights moment in American racial formations," a specific set of aesthetic practices employed by ethnic American writers that draws on "a changing relationship between race and social justice, race and identity, race and history [. . . in order to] invent a new imaginary for thinking about the nature of a just society and the role of race in its construction."²³ Although Saldívar focuses on how postracial aesthetics operate in relation to a mode that he calls "speculative realism," a "hybrid crossing of the fictional modes of the speculative genres, naturalism, social realism, surrealism, magical realism, dirty realism, and metaphysical realism" that finds expression in

the science fiction writing of writers like Charles Yu and Sesshu Foster, or in the fantastical and mythically inflected fiction of authors like Yamashita, Larissa Lai, and Sarah Shun-lien Bynum, it is important to note that Asian American fiction writers continue to work in the realist mode as they explore the meaning of race through postracial aesthetics.²⁴ In this regard, books like Chang-rae Lee's *Aloft* (2005), Bill Cheng's *Southern Cross the Dog* (2013), Jessica Hagedorn's *Toxicology* (2012), and Monique Truong's *Bitter in the Mouth* (2011) can also, like the texts Saldívar emphasizes, radically subvert the racial expectations structuring Asian American fiction. Specifically, Lee's decision to tell a suburban narrative from the perspective of a middle-aged Italian American narrator, Cheng's exploration of the Southern Gothic genre, Hagedorn's playful figuration of a vexed relationship between female artists, or Truong's provocative recalibration of racially based perceptions of identity as a result of her simultaneous attentiveness to her protagonist's medical condition – synesthesia, which turns sensory perception into specific tastes – and withholding of race as an identity marker, offer equally substantial challenges to the limits of race-based thinking precisely because they operate in the quotidian and familiar considered to be realism's domain.

As earlier noted, Asian American fiction's increased visibility can be partially explained by the belief in such literature's ethical influence. In this regard, the pedagogical injunctions of the literary become another key feature of contemporary Asian American fiction. While many Asian American fiction writers have shrugged off or otherwise resisted the burdens of minority representation – expectations having to do with performing representativeness or conforming to public notions of cultural authenticity – a fair number have also seen fiction as a means of teaching us how to live in a society that values difference and how to think critically. When asked by an interviewer for *The Washington Post* if she thought that her writing should be “useful,” Gish Jen responded by reasserting the pedagogical possibilities of Asian American fiction even as she cautioned against didacticism: “At the same time, I probably am more plagued than most of my contemporaries with the feeling that fiction writing is selfish. I’m not sure what I’m contributing to. That’s different from being didactic. You can’t make a useful contribution by being didactic because the novel will be dead. But do I want my work to be culture shifting? The answer is yes. I need to feel I have made society less restrictive in some way, that I have promoted understanding, that I have provided a place of reflection that has enabled people to become more thoughtful.”²⁵

Resisting didacticism while taking advantage of fiction's pedagogical potential obviously depends upon a host of formal decisions, too numerous to

catalog here. However, I suggest that the relationship between text and reader operates as a key site for such literary balancing acts. By focusing briefly on the deployment of the pronoun “you” in Chitra Divakaruni’s story “The Word Love” and Julie Otsuka’s final chapter in *When the Emperor Was Divine* (2003), I aim to demonstrate the sensitivity of contemporary Asian American fiction to the possibilities and the problems of fiction as the means of teaching the reader important lessons about how to read and think critically. Divakaruni’s short story from her collection *Arranged Marriage* (1996) is distinctive for its use of the second-person narrator. Focused on a young woman’s relationship with her mother and the subsequent dissolution of their bond in the wake of her decision to start living with a man in America, the story’s repeated and insistent use of “you” opens itself up to multiple interpretations: according to Rocío Davis, the narrative voice could be that of either the protagonist’s mother or lover, that of the young woman herself, or that of the author. Most strikingly, though, the use of “you” in the story, whoever speaks it, references the reader by obliging her or him “to experience cultural imperatives and choices directly, drawing him or her into the narrative and suggesting that this is, more than just the protagonist’s story, ours as well.”²⁶ Although Davis’s reading here tends to emphasize the universalizing effect of the pronoun, I suggest that such attention to the imperative generated by the repeated use of “you” as direct address in this story functions similarly to the ways in which Julie Otsuka utilizes this pronoun in her final chapter of *When the Emperor Was Divine*. As I have argued in an essay on the pedagogical issues raised by the teaching of multiethnic literatures, Otsuka’s innovative use of pronouns in her fiction – and her character’s deliberate address to an unspecified “you,” which could very well be the reader in the novel’s final chapter – serves as a pedagogical opportunity to illuminate both the pleasures of empathy and its problematic consequences. Specifically, Otsuka’s deft use of pronouns to universalize and particularize her characters simultaneously, and her pointed address to a “you” in the concluding chapter that both cannot be but also is the reader, locates the critical nature of the reader’s relationship to text as the site through which an ethical reengagement with alterity can be negotiated. The direct address to the reader in this chapter forces the reader to reassess the ways in which she or he has been reading by forcing the reader to consider her or his own complicity in the practice of racial oppression.

While Asian American fiction offers many such pedagogical opportunities in both our reading and teaching of it, perhaps the most enduring lesson it seeks to transmit involves the cultivation of a sustained engagement with – and a concerted effort to remake – the world. The reasons for Asian American

fiction's vitality are multiple, reasons integrally tied to historical contexts, social consciousness, pedagogical imperatives, institutional demands, and the dimensionality and forcefulness of the literature being crafted. By considering both diverse contexts and some of the formal features of contemporary Asian American fiction, it becomes apparent that the question of literary acclaim with which this chapter began has many possible answers, and that such answers might also be combined in order to create a variety of explanations. However one chooses to articulate the reasons for Asian American fiction's rising prestige, we see that the question can become the occasion for celebrating the varied accomplishments of such literature. In dynamic relation with a reading public that has increasingly come to expect the unexpected, Asian American fiction has become much more than the commercial categories of "Asian American literature," "ethnic American fiction," and "immigrant writing" would seem to imply, a proliferation that echoes the insight with which this chapter began: good writing always reveals "something much more than you ever knew you knew."

Notes

- 1 Russell Leong offers a detailed account of early Asian American literary forms and practices in "Poetry within Earshot: Notes on an Asian American Generation 1968–1978," *Amerasia Journal* 15.1 (1989): 165–93.
- 2 Min Hyoung Song, *The Children of 1965: On Writing, and Not Writing, as an Asian American*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 37.
- 3 Mark Chiang, *The Cultural Capital of Asian American Studies: Autonomy and Representation in the University* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 24.
- 4 Sau-ling C. Wong, "'Sugar Sisterhood': Situating the Amy Tan Phenomenon," in *The Ethnic Canon: Histories, Institutions, and Interventions*, ed. David Palumbo-Liu (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 202.
- 5 James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 3.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 10.
- 7 Larry Brown, "Vietnam through Wistful Eyes," *The Washington Post* (March 23 1992): D02.
- 8 Monique T.D. Truong, "The Reception of Robert Olen Butler's *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*: Ventriloquism and the Pulitzer Prize," *Viet Nam Forum* 16 (1997): 76.
- 9 Vince Passaro, "Voices and Dreams of Vietnamese Exiles," *New York Newsday* (March 12, 1992): 66.
- 10 Chiang, *Cultural Capital*, 190.
- 11 See the roundtable discussion "De-Privileging Positions" for a thorough review of this relationship. Davé, Shilpa, along with Pawan Dhingra, Sunaina Maira, Partha Mazumdar, Lavina Dhingra Shankar, Jaideep Singh, and Rajini Srikanth, "De-Privileging

- Positions: Indian Americans, South Asian Americans, and the Politics of Asian American Studies,” *JAAS* 3.1 (2000): 67–100.
- 12 A study published in the journal *Science* attempts to quantify the ways in which literary fiction – a fluid category that researchers tried to codify by choosing only to have their subjects read fiction that had been recognized with “prestigious awards (e.g. the National Book Award)” – enhances both affective Theory of Mind (the ability to detect and understand others’ emotions) and cognitive Theory of Mind (the inference and representation of others’ beliefs and intentions). Unsurprisingly, this “finding” got a great deal of treatment in the popular press, despite clear problems with methodology. For a critique of the problems with this study, see Mark Liberman’s “Annals of Overgeneralization.” Online resource: <http://languagelog.idc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=7715>.
 - 13 Gregory S. Jay, “The End of ‘American’ Literature: Toward a Multicultural Practice,” *College English* 53.3 (1991): 264.
 - 14 *Ibid.*, 274.
 - 15 Jesse Alemán, “Barbarous Tongues: Immigrant Fiction and Ethnic Voices in Contemporary American Literature,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 54.2 (2008): 398–9.
 - 16 See Tina Chen, “Agency/Asiancy,” in *The Routledge Companion to Asian American Literature*, ed. Rachel Lee (New York: Routledge, 2014).
 - 17 Bharati Mukherjee, *The Holder of the World* (New York: Ballantine, 1993), 19.
 - 18 Karen Tei Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange* (Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press, 1997), 56.
 - 19 Some examples of texts that demonstrate the kinds of generic instability referenced by these critics would include postmodern and experimental texts such as Jessica Hagedorn’s *Dogeaters*, Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange* and *I-Hotel*, Cathy Hong’s *Dance Dance Revolution*, Lily Hoang’s *Parabola*, and Sesshu Foster’s *Atomik Aztex*; speculative fictions such as Ruth Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being*, Chang-rae Lee’s *On Such a Full Sea*, Ken Liu’s “Paper Menagerie,” Ted Chiang’s *Stories of Your Life and Others*, Charles Yu’s *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*; and generic fiction such as Chang-rae Lee’s *Native Speaker* and Leonard Chang’s *Allen Choice Noir* trilogy.
 - 20 Eleanor Ty, “A Universe of Many Worlds,” *MELUS* 38.3 (2013): 160–1.
 - 21 Noelle Brada-Williams, “Twenty Years after through the Arc of the Rainforest: An Interview with Karen Tei Yamashita,” *Asian American Literature: Discourses and Pedagogies* 1 (2010): 4.
 - 22 Ramón Saldivar, “The Second Elevation of the Novel: Race, Form, and the Postrace Aesthetic in Contemporary Narrative,” *Narrative* 21.1 (2013): 1.
 - 23 *Ibid.*, 3, 5.
 - 24 *Ibid.*, 5.
 - 25 Carole Burns, “Interview with Gish Jen, author of *Tiger Writing*,” *The Washington Post* (March 19, 2013).
 - 26 Rocío Davis, “Asian American Stories and Literary Theory: A Reading of Chitra Divakaruni’s ‘The Word Love,’” *American Book Review* 31.1 (2009): 10.

Asian American Poetry and the Politics of Form

DOROTHY WANG

Despite the seminal importance of Asian American poetry, both Asian-language and English-language, throughout the history of Asians in the United States – from the first arrivals in the mid-nineteenth century to Chinese Exclusion and the formation of Chinatowns to Japanese American internment and yellow power and the Third World Strike of the 1960s and 1970s to the rise of “multicultural” literature in the 1990s and the futurity promised by digital poetics in the twenty-first century – Asian American poetry suffers from a lack of visibility not only within academic literary studies and American letters but even within the discipline of Asian American studies. Asian American poetry has never had its equivalent of a Maxine Hong Kingston or Amy Tan (or even a Jhumpa Lahiri, winner of a Pulitzer Prize). Yet this poetic tradition is almost a century and a half old, rich, widely diverse in its aesthetic styles, multilingual, radical, lyric, formally innovative, abstract, erotic, revolutionary, meditative, philosophical – anchored in various American literary traditions (mainstream and minority) and in global poetic traditions, Asian and European.

This marginalization of Asian American poetry is, arguably, a synecdochic reflection of the larger state of poetry in a capitalist society – poets tend not to write best sellers and poetry has no use-value – yet the erasure of poetry within literary purviews bespeaks a more profound and troubling fundamental misapprehension within American literary (and racial) ideologies: the (mis)reading, even if mostly unconscious, of the category of “Asian American poetry” as oxymoronic, a contradiction in terms, one that pits the sociopolitical (read: racial) against the aesthetic (the formal, the “purely” literary) in a false binary.¹

It is impossible that a 166-year history of Asians in the United States, a history that has seen the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act (the only immigration law in American history to exclude a specific targeted group on the basis of race); four wars in Asian countries; the internment of Japanese American citizens in concentration camps (the only group of American citizens to be interned on the basis of their race); the dropping of two nuclear bombs

on Japanese civilians; and countless Hollywood depictions of Fu Manchu, Charlie Chan, dragon ladies, geishas, broken-English-spouting (and desexualized) laundrymen, houseboys, geeks, and martial artists² would not have had an influence on perceptions of Asian American subjects and writers and cultural products – and of their relationship to “Americanness” and the English language. Asian Americans continue to be seen as constitutively foreign and unassimilable and, thus, the most nonnative of English speakers.

The juxtaposition of the most exalted of genres within the English literary tradition and the most nonnative of speakers of English produces an ineluctable tension of which critics, even those fancying themselves the most liberal (if not progressive), are largely unaware. For example, in introducing the work of Cathy Song (b. 1955), the first Asian American winner of the prestigious Yale Series of Younger Poets award for her *Picture Bride* in 1982, the selecting judge Richard Hugo described her as having a “sensibility strengthened by patience that is centuries old, ancestral, tribal, a gift passed down.”³ One can almost hear the clang of the gong amid the rustling of silks. But even well into the twenty-first century, sentiments not so dissimilar abound – as in this review of the 2009 Yale Younger prizewinner *Juvenilia* by Ken Chen (b. 1979), posted on the Poetry Foundation’s widely read Harriet blog a few years ago: “*Juvenilia* is a wonderful debut. . . . If this expansive journey could be compressed into a single sentence, it might be Chen’s own line: ‘The tears of Chinese Mermaids are said to be pearls.’”⁴

Beyond the poetry world, poems tend to be viewed mainly as expressions of the inner subjectivity of the poet, having little to do with the messy “real” world. Even a critic as illustrious as Mikhail Bakhtin viewed poetry as having “one unitary and indisputable . . . discourse,”⁵ as contrasted with the worldly heteroglossia of novelistic discourse. Yet, *contra* Bakhtin, poems by those who were later to be called “Asian American” were, from the very beginning, both political (in the broadest sense)⁶ and formal, aesthetically self-conscious – never delinked from the social and historical contexts of their making and of the poets’ formations. Even the earliest Asian American poets (and even those who were not formally educated) were conscious of their relation to at least one poetic tradition,⁷ and their poems display classic poetic tropes and linguistic manifestations, such as metaphor, irony, parody, and subtle use of tone and poetic structure. These early immigrants were linking themselves not just to Asian poetic forms, such as classical Chinese forms and haiku, but also to an English poetic tradition and, not infrequently, to contemporary poets and poetry “scenes” and movements. Moon Kwan (1895–?) published “To Witter Bynner” in 1919. A 1923 poem by Yone Noguchi (1875–1947), the

father of the famed artist Isamu Noguchi, is entitled “To Robert Browning.”⁸ Noguchi formed connections with Yeats, Thomas Hardy, Robert Bridges, and Pound, among others. He contributed to *Poetry* magazine, *The Dial*, *The Egoist*, and numerous other important literary and art journals at the center of various modernisms. His translations of haiku into English were crucial for Anglo-American literary Modernism and its *aesthetic* innovations.

That said, the first Asian immigrants to arrive in this country in the mid-nineteenth century and in the decades before and after legalized exclusion, largely wrote (if they were literate) in Chinese – in Chinatown newspapers, on the walls of the Angel Island detention center, in letters, in private journals, on scraps of paper that have not survived, and in other formats, of which we may be unaware.⁹ Yet, lest we think that all the early immigrants were railroad workers and miners in the West, let us keep in mind that the first Chinese graduate of an American university, Yung Wing, got his degree from Yale in 1854, only five years after the San Francisco gold rush. And the earliest Asian American poems in English date back to the late 1800s – for example, the writings of Sadakichi Hartmann (1867–1944), who arrived in Philadelphia from Japan in 1882, was mentored by Walt Whitman, became a friend of Alfred Stieglitz and other Greenwich Village “bohemian” artists, hobnobbed in France with Mallarmé and other Symbolist poets, and corresponded with Pound, who included him in a poem.¹⁰

These early Asian American poets were not only diasporic writers, well before that term came into vogue,¹¹ but were, from the start, linked to *aesthetic* forms and traditions – and in the case of someone like Hartmann, English- (and European-) language literary and artistic circles and movements (avant-garde, Modernist).

Thus, contrary to popular opinion, both inside and outside the academy, English-language Asian American poetry did not begin in the multicultural 1980s – or even in the 1960s and 1970s, with the formation of ethnic studies programs in California, though the activism in this time period was vitally important for the burgeoning of future Asian American poets¹² – but at the end of the nineteenth century. And counter to another stereotype of ethnic poetry, this writing was formally variegated and, in some cases, quite experimental from the beginning. For example, here is Hartmann’s Symbolist-inspired “Cyanogen Seas Are Surging” from 1898:

Cyanogen seas are surging
On fierce cinnabarine strands,
Where white Amazons are marching,
Through the radiance of the sands.¹³

Hartmann and Noguchi were not the only Modernist bohemians. Jose Garcia Villa (1908–97) was dubbed “The Pope of Greenwich Village” and also rebelled against poetic convention, engaging in discussions about poetry and art with the cutting-edge poets and artists of the day. There must surely be others whose poems are now lost to history.

Concurrently in the first few decades of the twentieth century, some poets were also writing explicitly political (leftist) poetry, as in “Chinaman, Laundryman” (1928) by H. T. Tsiang (1899–1971):

My skin is yellow,
Does my yellow skin color the clothes?
Why do you pay me less
For the same work
Clever boss!
You know
How to scatter the seeds of hatred
Among your ignorant slaves.¹⁴

The aesthetic and political heterogeneity of Asian American poetry has been occluded not only in our historical narratives of the development of Asian American literature but also in our perception and characterization of what “Asian American poetry” is or looks like – and by extension, our sense of what American poetry is.

About a century after “Cyanogen Seas,” the one Asian American poem deemed worthy of inclusion in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*,¹⁵ “Persimmons” by Li-Young Lee (b. 1957), is in several respects one’s idea of a “typical” Asian American or ethnic poem: autobiographical, mimetic, focused on family and differences from mainstream (i.e., white) culture, and brimming with ethnic signifiers. Critics have read it as “universal.” It has certainly not been viewed as political or avant-garde. Yet, as I have argued elsewhere,¹⁶ the language and rhetorical figures in the poem instantiate submerged or unconscious structures – the languages of desire, of the imaginary, and of the unconscious but also of ideologies, of processes of racialization, of the disciplinary, and of other material (if not always visible) workings of the political.

What has largely characterized the reception and (mis)readings of Asian American poetry since its inception has been a series of interrelated binaries – most notably the political and the aesthetic, the “alien” and the “American,” the nonnative speaker and the native speaker of English – that has failed to do service to the aesthetic and linguistic complexity of the poems, which, like any products of poetry-making, are never disconnected from one or more poetic traditions, separable from poetic forms, or unselfconscious in relation

to language. Why write a poem when a memoir or treatise would convey the “message” more straightforwardly and be much more “accessible”?

This tendency to read Asian American poetry for sociological content, as the reportage of a native informant, might be expected: after all, it is only the past few decades that Asian American literature has even been taught in English departments across the country and much of it still has third-class status (as a secondary minority literature compared to African American literature). It shares with other ethnic literatures a second-class status to literature by racially “unmarked” writers. Poetry by racialized persons is almost always read as an appendage to the larger (and more “primary”) fields of English-language poetry and poetics – including the lyric, avant-garde poetry, American poetry – categories all too often presumed to be universal and overarching and implicitly racially unmarked.

While Frank O’Hara’s poems may come across as chatty “I do this,” “I do that” sort of first-person autobiographical poems, students rarely consider him as a flesh-and-blood gay white man living in New York City in the 1950s, one whose language both represents and embodies gay male urban speech. Critics, too, often read his poems as representing a highly sophisticated – wittily ironic, hyper self-aware – poetic diction, one that never takes itself too seriously in the humorless way that minority writers are thought to do. Indeed, the speakers in O’Hara poems are not thought of as raced in any way – they are seen as racially “unmarked.” And his references to “Chinamen jump[ing]” do not cause even the slightest flicker of an eyelash.

While both Chinese American poet Lee and gay Irish American poet O’Hara do not occupy the position of the normative (straight white, male, Anglo-Saxon) poet and while both of their poems may be read as personal expressions of an inner subjectivity, the racialized poet is read as *necessarily* speaking autobiographically while white male poets, even “white ethnic” sexually minoritized ones, can still be read as speaking from a less narrow and more generalizable position.

The reason for this discrepancy has much to do with the crucial position of the poetic speaker and that speaker’s relation to the ascribed identity of the poet “behind” the poem. The question of the poetic speaker and how she or he is apprehended is, in turn, linked to fundamental notions and assumption about poetic categories and terms and is, thus, not simply tied to the question of the social identities of particular poets.

Whether or not the poetic speaker of O’Hara’s poems is read as a real person, as a persona, or as some abstracted form of “Frank O’Hara,” he is read as having the freedom to occupy the positions of being both “individual”

and universal simultaneously. O'Hara and Robert Frost and Charles Bernstein have all clearly been granted this subjective freedom. At the same time, these poets have been bestowed another kind of freedom, an aesthetic one. Critics inevitably discuss formal questions – for example, tone and syntax – when speaking about Ashbery's poems but almost exclusively focus on "black" content when examining the work of, say, Baraka, a poet who pushed the limits of formal invention in American poetry certainly as long as John Ashbery has.¹⁷ Likewise, how many critics approach the poems of Li-Young Lee by studying his use of anaphora? In other words, Ashbery as poet is granted aesthetic autonomy, whereas Baraka and Lee are leadenly bound by their material being to the concrete, the thematic, the residual.

Whereas racially "unmarked" poetry is seen as encompassing a wide spectrum of production – from the writings of Gertrude Stein and Kenneth Goldsmith to those of Marianne Moore and Mark Strand – minority poetry is not. The opposition that gets set up is not simply one between interesting formally experimental poetry and bad lyric poetry but between "good" formally innovative poetry and bad "identity poetry" – a term that has come to be conflated with bad minority poetry. There is a mismatch or confusion of categories, of the aesthetic and the social. Minority poetry is *ipso facto* bad autobiographical content- and identity-driven poetry.

On the rare occasions that experimental minority poets are included in the avant-garde fold, only one or two from each ethnic food group has the privilege of being selected: say, Tracie Morris as the go-to black poet, Mónica de la Torre as the Latina Conceptual poet, and so on. Thus, in a not atypical liberal move, a few minority poets are made mascots – these few are deemed worthy enough because they "write like us" and "Oh, isn't it great they also happen to be black." So the critic gets to feel good about his or her multicultural street cred. The poet-critic Harryette Mullen has dubbed such gestures "aesthetic apartheid."¹⁸

The other critical tendency, equally troubling, by critics of avant-garde poetry when reading formally experimental work by minority poets is to completely ignore the racial identity of the poet or the issue of race in the poetry, especially when there are no overt thematic markers of race and even when the poet has declared the importance of that formation in her poetry. Thus, like their more aesthetically conservative counterparts, critics of avant-garde poetry, too, rely on overt content-based notions of racial subjectivity, failing to recognize how racial formations can make themselves felt in language and in what is *not* said or said only obliquely. For them, an absence of overt racial markers equals the erasure or irrelevance of race in the work – an odd critical

move for those who normally place such emphasis on aesthetic forms and eschew referential and thematically driven readings.

For example, when discussing the work of Mei-mei Berssenbrugge (b. 1947), an experimental Asian American poet, even very astute critics of poetry usually fail to mention a word about the importance of her formation as a racially minoritized biracial poet on the language of her poetry, even though Berssenbrugge emphatically identifies herself as an Asian American poet and speaks openly and repeatedly of the influence her identity has had on her work. Critics focus on issues of gender, science, affect, and so on – never race.

By examining the poetry of Berssenbrugge, whose poems can be read as both lyric and experimental at once, we put pressure on our assumptions about poetic form and the poetic speaker, as well as our assumptions about minority poetry, avant-garde poetry, and the nature of the literary.

Berssenbrugge's career trajectory represents a unique case in contemporary avant-garde poetry: although she is now primarily linked by critics to white experimental women poets of the Language School, such as Leslie Scalapino, early in her career in the 1970s, Berssenbrugge publicly affiliated herself with politically outspoken writers of color, many of whom, such as Ishmael Reed, were and still are viewed as cultural nationalists. To this day, Berssenbrugge speaks of the significant influence of these writers of color on her work: "I was part of the multi-cultural movement that was in the early 1970s. . . . It was important that the stories of people's immigrant experience got told."¹⁹

Born in 1947 in Beijing to a Dutch American father and a Chinese mother, Berssenbrugge spoke Chinese as her first language, a fact that she considers crucial for her later development as a poet.²⁰ She moved to the United States at age one, was raised in Massachusetts, educated at Reed and Columbia, and has spent decades living in New Mexico and New York City. Berssenbrugge has written a dozen books of poetry, a few in collaboration with visual artists, including her husband, Richard Tuttle, and Kiki Smith. Her selected and new poems *I Love Artists* was published by the University of California Press in 2006. Her most recent book of poems, *Hello, the Roses*, came out from New Directions in 2013. Thus, Berssenbrugge, in her life and poetry, challenges the overly simplistic critical binary that pits "bad" identitarian minority poets against more "sophisticated" avant-garde poets.

In a 2006 interview, she stated, "I try to expand a field by dissolving polarities or dissolving the borders between one thing and another."²¹ Indeed, Berssenbrugge is intensely interested in various human and natural phenomena that embody two states at once – for example, what is both concrete and abstract– phenomena such as color, fragrance, fog, a horizon, feeling,

mood, consciousness, and so on. The syntax of her sentences ties human consciousness to natural phenomena in a manner that is neither metaphorical nor literal.

For Berssenbrugge, it is possible to occupy different states of being simultaneously without contradiction. She states explicitly in several interviews that “the continuum between material and immaterial” is one of her main subjects.²² But we do not actually need to be told this – we can see it clearly from the poems. Her long twelve-part poem “Fog”²³ is perhaps the best example of her continual exploration of ideas about this continuum between material and immaterial, as well as the continuum between human consciousness and the natural world, between abstract and concrete.

The two middle sections of the poem, sections 5 and 6, deserve a closer look, as they raise issues central to Berssenbrugge’s poetic practice:

It has no shape or color that is stable, as if I had fallen asleep . . . (42)

. . . A part of the person can become visible at a time, or parts of the people, and other parts rest in folds of the fog, as if they were muffled sounds. (42)

At night, she could see as if the country were illuminated, as if it were day. (43)

The natural phenomenon of fog exemplifies the simultaneous states of being both embodied and disembodied (“Though it is visible, it is not a concrete substance”). Water is one substance that can change quickly from one form to another or occupy two or three states at once: “Fog is a kind of grounded cloud composed like any cloud of tiny drops of water or of ice crystals, forming an ice fog” (38). At the same time, “fog” is a metaphor for human states of being or identity. The phrase “as if” opens the door to these other worlds, revealing to us the instability of knowing and of being – in other words, the notion of epistemological and ontological contingency, both of natural phenomena and of human states of being in the world.

The concept of contingency is crucial in Berssenbrugge’s work. Contingency suggests contiguity, affinity, connectivity but also dependency, uncertainty, chance. It contains within it the possibility of something fortuitous and/or something untoward, for the exercising of free will and being at the mercy of chance.

Not dissimilarly, the idea that a person cannot be reduced to a fixed state of being is key in Berssenbrugge’s poems. Neither human identity nor blood relations is fixed. Section 5 of “Fog” begins in this way:

It has no shape or color that is stable, as if I had fallen asleep and a long bridge appeared, where my relatives are like companions crossing a bridge. (42)

When you look at your husband, you think of a floating flag of the roof.

Even though he is your husband, he is not stable. (42)

Berssenbrugge's style is characterized by her frequent use of pronouns – not only personal pronouns (“you,” “she,” etc.), but also deictic pronouns (literally, pronouns that point), such as “this” and “it” and “that,” whose reference must be fixed through the context of the utterance. Roman Jakobson, after Otto Jespersen, called such words as deictic pronouns “shifters,” words “whose meaning [differ] according to the situation.”²⁴ Every shifter, in other words, has a general more existential or abstracted meaning (e.g., “you” means the addressee) but also a specific meaning in the given situation (her husband, herself).

It is not hard to see, given what we can learn of Berssenbrugge's approach to understanding the world, that such words, which represent two states of being at once, work in congruence with her epistemological and ontological inclinations. For example, in the quotes from “Fog” cited previously, we can see that the pronoun “it” can refer to the fog and/or a state of consciousness (“It has no shape or color that is stable, as if I had fallen asleep . . .”). “It” can also refer to both/either a temporal moment and/or a physical space (“At night, she could see as if the country were illuminated, as if it were day”); time and space are not easily separable. “You” can refer to a second-person someone or to herself. The “she” is also likely a reference to herself – so the speaker occupies the position of both “I” and “she,” observer and observed, subject and object. Identity is fluid, shifting, unstable. The pronouns here are truly contingent – affiliated and contiguous, yet also dependent on others.²⁵ In another poem, “Forms of Politeness,” the speaker remarks on “the intensity of yellow light on the hill, / which is not a thing *and* it is not a metaphor” (original emphasis; 55). It is not that Berssenbrugge rejects either metaphors or things; she rejects the false binary. Her poetry is both lyrical and abstract, rooted in the concrete particularities of the natural and human worlds yet also metaphysical.

The question of race and poetry dates back to the founding of these United States. Two hundred and twenty-one years later, not a single American minority poet is mentioned in the 2008 *PMLA* special section “The New Lyric Studies.” Nor, in 2014, is race or poetry by nonwhite poets considered to have any relevance for “Poetry and Society,” a seminar convened over three days, featuring twelve scholars, at the 2014 American Comparative Literature Association conference in New York City. Not a single nonwhite scholar was included. None of the papers discussed the topic of race or minority poetry; most focused on that year's theme “Capital” (as if more than three hundred

years of chattel slavery were irrelevant to that issue). This question of unequal representation inheres not only at the level of the countable taxable body (3/5 a person) but at the very heart of the notion of formal equality and of aesthetic form.

"The problem is not to turn the subject, the effect of the genes, into an entity," writes Berssenbrugge in the poem "Four Year Old Girl" (83). Her critique of inflexible notions of racial identity tends to be oblique, yet, completely consistent with her desire to "dissolv[e] polarities or dissolv[e] the borders between one thing and another." Thus, issues of race and racial identity are not marginal to her poetry but central to her project of desiring to dematerialize whatever binarizes and keeps states of being and of nature separate and opposed, when they are, in actuality, part of a continuum.

As we know all too well from American social and literary history, speaking "straight" about race, racialization, and – most of all – racism runs the risk of the speaker's being accused of "playing the race card," being an "angry minority," and/or writing bad "identity" poetry.²⁶ Do poems offer any form of mediated "buffer," by means of poetic language, from such accusations? Does the poetic speaker, as separate from the poet, enable the poet to speak frankly, through poems, about "difficult" topics?

The poet Prageeta Sharma (b. 1972) has grappled with these issues – and the question of the poem's often fraught relation to the poet's subjectivity and experience – in her four volumes of poetry: *Bliss to Fill* (2000; 2nd ed., 2005), *The Opening Question* (2004), *Infamous Landscapes* (2007), and *Undergloom* (2013).²⁷ Despite her affiliation for many years with experimental poetry circles in Brooklyn (since 2007 she has been teaching at the University of Montana in Missoula), Sharma is not unaware of the expectations critics and readers bring to a poem, even a formally innovative or avant-garde one by a minority poet. The titles of some of her poems (e.g., "Family," "A Most Feeling Girl," "Authentic Mode") dangle the promise of ethnic revelation – deeply felt ethnic emotion, glimpses into her South Asian family – but the expectations they set up are invariably stymied, especially in the poems from her first three volumes.

In "These Overthrown Stones to Morning" in her first book, the character "Prageeta" appears in the third person. The speaker asks,

Why does Prageeta persist? This unbearable taunt or excitement, or empathy, she does not respect him in the way he wants? Stupid weather, a bulldozer, unpredictable and irate, raising his blood pressure and anxiety with her muck – the satisfaction of the lord rests on his serf's will. Arguments do arouse this poem which oscillates in the same, trying space as arguments. (21)

The poem resists our learning much about “Prageeta.” There is a male character named “Alexander” or “Alex” who seems to be the “he” of the poem but one is never sure. From whose point of view are the questions asked, the statement made? While the poem is a slightly disguised and revised sestina, the traditional form only further baffles the reader’s desire to learn something about “Prageeta Sharma,” the flesh-and-blood Indian American poet.

In “Apology,” from the same volume, a poem in letter form discusses “Prageeta”: “Dear _____, // It is disturbing to learn of the problems that you are encountering with Prageeta. / Our representative, Prageeta will meet you Friday to investigate the problem” (25). The letter is signed “Her representative.” Later in the poem-letter the “representative” states that “Prageeta stands 100% behind herself as a product.” Sharma is deeply aware that the logic of multicultural liberalism dictates that not only is the racialized ethnic person a “product” but so is the racialized ethnic poet (and her poem) – perhaps even more so. The minority poet must sell herself as a pleasing ethnic commodity, one that knows her place, is deferential (or better yet, apologetic), well-spoken, and never unruly or ungrateful.

In her poetry, Sharma does not shy away from references to South Asian identity or to India, but she resists giving in to what is demanded of her poems’ (and her) commodification. In “Family” (from *The Opening Question*), the stereotypical “ethnic identity”-type title sets up certain expectations, which are thwarted from the very first stanza:

... He says, my name is Jug Dish,
and you are pointing west when you say dish, desh.
And you are taking a stab when you say jug. Jag.
However, the name is Indian. Point west, take a stab.
This is my house. I am a child. He is Jug Dish. We are an Indian
family with Indian friends from India. Jug Dish studies English poetry.
I study English poetry. I point west to take a stab at a silverfish. (46)

What is being averred here about “family” exactly? There is no narrative, only a series of non sequiturs and various rather farcical names that sound vaguely “Indian.” In the passage, pronouns are invoked that oscillate between first, second, and third person, with no fixed stable referents.

Pronouns, as I have stated earlier, are deeply tied to assumptions and beliefs about the poetic speaker – and the nature of and conditions for poetic speech. In poetic speech, the voice of the poetic speaker is viewed as separable from the poet’s (though, as I have pointed out, this literary critical truism often gets forgotten when discussing work by minority poets). In what ways is this

separation of poet and poetic speaker made more complicated when the “real” poet’s “actual” subjectivity and voice are already bifurcated or multiply riven – when ethnic poets and subjects already function as personae or representatives? The minority poet and subject is, in effect, split from herself, becoming both first person and third person.

The question of pronouns is as important in Sharma’s work as it is in Berssenbrugge’s though with different emphases. While Sharma is also thinking about the “I” as a “she” and the relationality of the “I” to the “you,” whether the “you” as self or other, she seems to be more concerned than Berssenbrugge with the conditions under which an Asian American “girl” speaks – or is allowed to speak – in poetry. Do poems indeed exist in the “same, trying space as arguments”?

In “A Most Feeling Girl,” from Sharma’s second volume, the title again promises the revelation of ethnic emotional expressivity, but what one gets is something different:

A most feeling girl is a tireless
spy trapped in a hearth,
dropped in a drum,
carpeted and strung. (28)

Under the logic of both settler colonialism and liberal multiculturalism, the racially marked person and the racially marked poet are “trapped” within certain narrow codes of acceptable behavior and allowable speech, including poetic speech. The proper expression of feeling should be one that is controlled, restrained, “rational,” especially when speaking of the unpleasant topic of race (which is, preferably, not raised at all); to do otherwise is to run the risk of being dismissed as an “out-of-control” angry minority who writes shoddy didactic poetry. The minority poet should use irony – or better yet, humor – to discuss whatever unfortunate experiences she has had as a minority person. She should never show upsetness in her poems.

No ethnic poet wants to be accused of being overly sincere or “too serious” or too angry in her poems (thus, the question of tone to convey the “proper” affective stance toward her racialized experience is crucial). Such rhetorical faux pas not only violate the unspoken rules of decorum in polite American society but also reveal an embarrassing lack of understanding on the brown poet’s part of the unspoken criteria of poetry – whether Eliot’s “objective correlative” or the proper modes of speaking (a bemused ironic distance) in the hip world of avant-garde poetry.

But what of those situations in which rage might be the only appropriate – or logical or rational or sane – response?

In Sharma's fourth book, *Undergloom*, published in 2013, it becomes clear that something has shifted quite dramatically in the speakerly voice(s) in her poems in the six years since *Infamous Landscapes*. For the first time, an explicitly South Asian figure appears on her book cover: a cartoon rendering of a dark-skinned woman whose head and torso rest on a red leaf while her arms, which appear at first to be a pair of legs, dangle apart from her body, one hand tugging at the leaf while the other caresses the female figure's left shoulder.

One sees immediately that the poems in *Undergloom* have become much less oblique in their treatment of race and racism – much more explicit in their critique, as in this line from the long poem "A Situation for Mrs. Biswas": "White people bury their resentments beneath their liberalism" (45). And later in the poem: "People hadn't seen me as me, I started to feel it" (49); to whom does the abstract and unqualified noun "people" here refer? Sharma has stated explicitly that this particular poem was her contemplation "of my act of confessing and articulating discrimination . . . a kind of lyric essay about my father and the racial discrimination he experienced. My poem wonders about my own 'state of rage.'"²⁸ At one point in the poem, the speaker says bluntly, "There are assertions about difference / That I had not wanted to make in the past, but now did" (49).

A biographical reading is not necessary to see that the shift in tone and in the kinds of truth statements made in *Undergloom* point toward cogent questions: What are the conditions under which poetic speakers and poets have the freedom to express the full range of their personhood and experience? Are there (poetic) conditions under which a South Asian American female poet might be able to discuss racial injury without being dismissed out of hand? Does invoking an English literary tradition and/or demonstrating formal mastery "protect" her from charges of "playing the race card" or, worse, poetic incompetence? Is frank discussion about race and racism more possible in the space of the poem than in the "real world" – or less?

In the poem "Authentic Mode" from Sharma's first book, the speaker says, "I want to emphasize formal beauty rather than baths of classes . . ." (23). Throughout her books, Sharma demonstrates her ability to use many traditional poetic forms and render them in a twenty-first-century voice. She is firmly rooted in Western poetic traditions – Wordsworth, Shelley, Dickinson, Rilke, Williams, Laura Riding Jackson, Stevens, Ashbery, Creeley, Oppen, and Guest are among the poets she cites. Indeed, many of Sharma's poems deal with the meta-question of poetry, its function, its relation to the "self."

But in *Undergloom*, all this exhilaration about formal beauty and the possibilities of poetry – “I was consumed with the bliss of poetry” (“A Situation for Mrs. Biswas,” 46) – seems to have run head-on into the realities of living in a racialized body: “They care more about ‘you’ than for you (you the person you),” says the speaker in “Poetry Anonymous” (57). It is clear that Sharma is always aware of the conditions under which she writes poetry, under which her poetic speakers speak. In this regard, she is no different from the first Asian American poets who wrote, whether in Asian languages or English, in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. What a century and a half of living as “Americans” had promised was that by obtaining a command of English, knowledge of the English literary tradition, and mastery of its poetic forms, the Asian American citizen and poet could become a “real” American and a “real” poet by extension.

The truth is that writing the perfect sestina or the most avant-garde racially stripped poem does not offer protection from the politics of the “real” world or get one accepted as a “real poet.” As Langston Hughes reminded us almost ninety years ago: to think and say, “I want to be a poet – not a Negro poet” really means “I want to write like a white poet.”²⁹

Poetry should be a space where telling hard and painful truths – not comfortable liberal truisms – is not only possible but initiated; these include the truths of American social and literary history and the occlusion, marginalization, and erasure of so many nonwhite voices. “And yet poetry haunts with its suggestion that terrible things are true . . .,” declares the speaker in Sharma’s “A Situation for Mrs. Biswas” (48).

Now, a decade and a half into the twenty-first century, with new digital poetries and forms on the horizon, it is time to rethink fundamental poetic and literary categories and foundational assumptions and concepts, and re-ask (or ask for the first time) the question “Who has the right to express the full range of poetic (and political) speech?” This responsibility falls not just upon Asian American and other minority poets but also upon those who think they are racially “unmarked” – even, or especially, the most well-meaning.

Notes

- 1 A concomitant and equally false binary that condemns the writing of racial minorities to the margins is that of the particular versus the universal. “Ethnic” poetry is narrow, marginal, and of interest only to members of that particular ethnic group, while racially “unmarked” poetry speaks to all of humanity. Think of the differing receptions of Amiri Baraka and John Ashbery.
- 2 These media depictions continue to this day. One recent example among countless: the character of “Han Lee,” a Korean American diner owner who is the “boss”

- of two white women on the CBS primetime show *2 Broke Girls*. Lee is the typical broken-English-spouting buffoon, the butt of jokes for his small stature and sexual repulsiveness (not to mention his futile desire for white women). *The New Yorker* reviewer, Emily Nussbaum called the show “so racist it is less offensive than baffling” – not baffling at all if she knew her American history. See Emily Nussbaum, “Crass Warfare,” *The New Yorker* (November 28, 2011).
- 3 Cathy Song, *Picture Bride* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), x.
 - 4 Gonzalez Rigoberto, “Shout Out to Ken Chen,” posted April 21, 2010. Online resource: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2010/04/shout-out-to-ken-chen/>.
 - 5 M. M. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist and trans. Caryl Emerson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 283.
 - 6 E.g., Chinese immigrants were acutely aware of the power relations between the United States and a weak China, a global backdrop that acutely affected their reception in this country. A 1911 poem from San Francisco Chinatown begins: “The mighty power rescinds her treaty; / The weak race suffers oppression from the mighty. / I am jailed unjustly across the bay.” From Marlon Hom, *Songs of Gold Mountain: Cantonese Rhymes from San Francisco Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 83.
 - 7 For Chinese-language poets, these forms come from a poetic lineage that predates the British poetic tradition by over a millennium.
 - 8 Included in Juliana Chang, ed., *Quiet Fire: A Historical Anthology of Asian American Poetry, 1892–1970* (New York: The Asian American Writers’ Workshop, 1996), 12.
 - 9 See, e.g., Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung, eds., *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910–1940*, 2nd ed. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014) and Hom, *Songs of Gold Mountain*. Even the earliest poems carved on walls or penned on paper by largely working-class men were written in specific and usually quite strict classical forms.
 - 10 See Jane Calhoun Weaver, ed., *Sadakichi Hartmann, Critical Modernist: Collected Art Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 1–3, 12.
 - 11 And in the case of Chinese-language writers, part of “Sinophone” literary worlds outside China, to use Shu-mei Shih’s term.
 - 12 Community arts and writing organizations, such as Kearney Street in San Francisco and the Basement Workshop in New York City, were vital for promoting the development of writing by Asian Americans in the 1970s, as were early literary journals such as *Gidra* in Los Angeles and *Bridge* in New York City. They paved the way for the rich output that was to come. Their work has been continued by various Asian American arts organizations, most notably the Asian American Writers’ Workshop in New York City. See Faye Chiang’s and Kimiko Hahn’s essays in *Quiet Fire* for their recollections of the history of the Basement Workshop. See also Timothy Yu, “Inventing a Culture: Asian American Poetry in the 1970s,” *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry since 1965* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).
 - 13 Reprinted in *Quiet Fire*.
 - 14 H. T. Tsiang, *Poems of the Chinese Revolution* (self-published: 1929), 7. Online resource: <http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1042&context=moore>.
 - 15 “Persimmons” was first included in the 1996 fourth edition and remains in the current fifth edition, published in 2004.

- 16 In the introduction and chapter on Lee in Dorothy Wang, *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Racial Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014).
- 17 As Andrew Epstein writes in a January 27, 2014 post on his blog on the New York School of Poets, "[N]ot much has been said about Baraka's close alliance with O'Hara and the New York School of poetry." Online resource: <https://newyorkschoolpoets.wordpress.com/2014/01/27/leroi-and-frank-on-the-friendship-of-amiri-baraka-and-frank-ohara/>. Baraka is the "LeRoi" of O'Hara's "Personal Poem"; a Japanese American artist friend of O'Hara's, "Mike Kanemitsu," is also mentioned by name in that poem.
- 18 Harryette Mullen, "Poetry and Identity," in *Telling It Slant: Avant-Garde Poetics of the 1990s*, ed. Mark Wallace and Steven Marks (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 27–31. Originally published in the Canadian journal *West Coast Line* 30.1 (Spring 1996): 85–9.
- 19 Zhou Xiaojing, "Blurring the Borders between Formal and Social Aesthetics: An Interview with Mei-mei Berssenbrugge," *MELUS* 27.1 (Spring 2002): 199. See also Laura Hinton, "Three Conversations with Mei-mei Berssenbrugge," *Jacket* 27 (April 2005). Online resource: <http://jacketmagazine.com/27/hint-bers.html>. Reprinted in Elizabeth Frost and Cynthia Hogue, eds., *Innovative Women Poets: An Anthology of Contemporary Poets and Interviews* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007). It is important to acknowledge the profound impact of African American activism and culture on Asian American politics and literature (as on literature by racially "unmarked" persons). African American political struggles – civil rights activism, black power – and culture (especially jazz and blues) deeply influenced yellow power and Asian American literature, perhaps most notably in the rhythms and diction of Lawson Inada's poems and Frank Chin's prose. See Lawson Fusao Inada, *Before the War: Poems as They Happened* (New York: Morrow, 1971).
- 20 She tells Hinton, "I feel very strongly that my first language was Chinese – my mother tongue."
- 21 Michele Gerber Klein, "Mei-Mei [sic] Berssenbrugge," *Bomb* 96 (Summer 2006). Online resource: <http://bombsite.com/issues/96/articles/2835>.
- 22 See, e.g., her interviews with Hinton and Zhou.
- 23 The poem originally appeared in Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, *Empathy* (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1989). It is also included in Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, *I Love Artists: New and Selected Poems* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). I quote from the version in *I Love Artists*.
- 24 Otto Jespersen, *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin* (New York: Henry Holt, 1924), 123.
- 25 One might interject here by saying, "But John Ashbery, too, uses pronouns widely. Why is Berssenbrugge special in this regard?" To which I would answer that Ashbery's use of pronouns reflect his particular poetic and nonpoetic concerns; they are different from Berssenbrugge's and stem from his experiences, his subject formation, and so on, just as her concerns stem from hers.
- 26 Note, e.g., what happened to John Yau and Marilyn Chin when they dared to call out the racism of a good liberal poet (Eliot Weinberger) and publisher (Copper Canyon Press). See my chapters on these receptions in Wang, *Thinking Its Presence*.

- 27 Prageeta Sharma, *Bliss to Fill*, 2nd ed. (New York: subpress collective, 2005); Sharma, *The Opening Question* (New York: Fence Books, 2004); Sharma, *Infamous Landscapes* (Albany, NY: Fence Books, 2007); Sharma, *Undergloom* (Albany, NY: Fence Books, 2013).
- 28 Prageeta Sharma, "Model Minority, Dreaming, and Cheap Signaling: Outrage and Outreach," *Boston Review's* online forum "Race and the Poetic Avant-Garde," March 10, 2015.
- 29 Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," in *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 91–5. Originally published in *The Nation* (June 23, 1926).

The Forgotten War in Korea

JOSEPHINE PARK

Ty Pak's *Guilt Payment* (1983), a collection of short stories centered on the Korean War, offers a hard-bitten history lesson:

Korea, the spoil of World War II, was divided and occupied by Russians and Americans, who set up their stooges to form "independent" governments. There was heavy rhetoric on both sides, each claiming egalitarianism and accusing the other of exploitation and imperialism. . . . At American prodding the South had carried out a land reform. . . . Key industries, electricity, telephone, railroad, mining, all previously Japanese owned, reverted to the government. The North had also nationalized and collectivized, with the inevitable concentration of power in the hands of the privileged few. Each had their Russian or American military governors, called "advisers." Power was ever so attractive and always suborned the soul. Bloody street fights broke out everywhere between the opposing factions.¹

The street fights of the late 1940s would escalate into the Cold War's first hot war: from 1950 to 1953, this imperial hinterland would be overrun with hastily enlisted soldiers and foreign fighters, who swept up and down the peninsula. Pak, a firsthand witness to the violence, presents the devastating wake of one such punishing drive in the war's first year, after occupying Northern forces were routed from the Southern capital:

The streets of Seoul were littered with downed telephone and power lines. Charred, crumbling walls stood gauntly, still smoking among heaps of smoldering rubble. A woman in tatters poked among a pile of roof tiles and burnt timbers. The headless body of a Communist soldier sprawled across the curb. Two children sat crying by their dead mother. . . . A girl of about five, blind, her feet burned away, stumbled down the street, falling repeatedly. A section of the Chonggye sewage drain was choked with hundreds of speared and clubbed bodies. An uncovered trench at Chongo was packed with about a thousand civilians, former South Korean police, government officials, and businessmen with their hands bound behind their backs and bullet holes in their brains. (138–9)

This rapid-fire narration, at once pulpy and dispassionate, insists upon the horror of a conflict best known for being forgotten. Pak's rank cynicism toward the politics of Korea's division coupled with his outrage against the senseless violence of the ensuing civil war echo throughout the stories, which tackle the conflict from multiple perspectives – Northern and Southern, soldiers and civilians, in the heat of the battle and decades later, in America. The stories indict and exult in the gruesome spectacle of unleashed political force.

Rendered as a brutal, political morass, the war remains meaningless. Indeed, the war that courses through Pak's rough-and-tumble writing serves as a stage for smaller, personal conflicts: in these stories, the civil war becomes an alibi for settling old scores and, notably, reviving old flames. Though the stories repeatedly gesture toward the politics of the upheaval – as in a characteristic instance when one protagonist overhears fellow patrons at a bar discussing “politics, the usual topic, lamenting the fate of a Korea liberated from the clutches of the Japanese dog only to be halved and torn by worse wolves” (161) – Pak's characters evince a curious unwillingness, perhaps even inability, to give an account of the Korean War. The war is the setting or the secret of all of these stories, and its terrors are occasions for individual forays and desires. A teenager during the war who would later become a journalist in Korea before immigrating to the United States, Pak wrote war stories that show us almost too much, but when they broach “politics, the usual topic,” Pak writes in a fatalism that renders inevitable a globalized civil war.

As the war unfolded, Americans were told that they were not fighting for the place or its people but because Korea was, as President Truman put it in his 1951 State of the Union address, a “symbol.” The Korean War was unprecedented for its limits: a war fought to preserve a boundary between adversaries, it was packaged as a preventive measure against a potential third world war. And, when the dreaded all-out war froze into a strangely reassuring chill and middle-class Americans enjoyed virtually mythic prosperity, the symbol disappeared. In fact, the Korean War marked a new era of militarization, in which the executive branch extended its reach by concealing its actions. This war is best known for being forgotten in large part because it was orchestrated to disappear. No efforts were made to mobilize the domestic population; instead, an actively encouraged forgetting set the template for veiling U.S. military reach into distant regions of the globe. Washington aimed to keep the war off the nightly news, and as a result Korea became a mysterious fight, better forgotten.

Moreover, the significance and legibility of this war have always been eclipsed by other conflicts. Lodged between the Pacific War and the American

War in Vietnam, Korea did not inspire the patriotic fervor whipped up against enemy Japan and never touched the antiwar chord that resounded in the Vietnam era. Indeed, that the Korean War belongs to the so-called postwar era demonstrates its peculiar invisibility, and the heightened antiimperial suspicions unleashed in Vietnam largely buried the novelty and surprising success – in the eyes of the U.S. policy makers of the era – of this earlier instance of proxy warfare. Korea set in motion Vietnam's quagmire, and this first hot war consolidated the Cold War foreign policy that would become such a bitter source of contention during the second.

Decades after the cessation of active fighting, how to tell the story of the ongoing Korean War remains a live question. For Korean American writers, the war has long been swept aside; instead, the injustices of the colonial period and the late-twentieth-century economic miracle have more typically been the focus of popular, scholarly, and literary writing by Korean Americans. Even as the refugees created out of this strange war instigated waves of chain migrations to the United States, this war has only lurked along the edges of the Korean American story – which has tended to follow a more familiar narrative of economic immigration. For Korean American authors, the majority of whom came of age in the generation after the war, the conflict receded into a shadowy past behind Asian American experiences fit into a recognizable frame of immigrant ambition.

It is worth noting that the category of Asian American literature is a product of the Vietnam era, and though this creation sparked a recovery effort that went back a century, the Korean War was forgotten, too, in Asian American studies. In dramatic contrast to the revelation of injustice against Japanese Americans during the Pacific War and the renewed attention to Third World politics during the Vietnam era, Asian America has not taken up the Korean War as a critical lens for uncovering U.S. intervention in Asia and its repercussions for Asian American populations. In the absence of a critical Asian American focus, the Korean War remains further lost in the gap between detached superpower interests and the internecine brutality of civil war.

Yet the major New York publishing houses did touch on this unpopular conflict in three major literary works by Asian American novelists. Richard E. Kim's long-forgotten 1964 bestseller *The Martyred* used the occasion of the Korean War to delve into a rapidly Westernizing Korean consciousness, Susan Choi's acclaimed first novel *The Foreign Student* rediscovered and revised the war in 1998, and Chang-Rae Lee's 2010 *The Surrendered* marked a late return to the war that lurked at the edges of his previous novels. These novels are remarkable not only because they stand as the handful of fictions

devoted to the Korean War, but because all three grapple with how to tell the story of a conflict deliberately kept off-stage even as it was being fought.

Hence, unlike the roiling political welter and abject suffering presented in Pak's work, each of these more well-heeled novelists formally contends with the literary challenge of depicting a conflict long deemed uninteresting. While the Korean War was a total war for Pak – as it was for most Koreans – Kim, Choi, and Lee have crafted complex representations of a limited war meant to appeal to a readership of serious fiction. In their highly mannered approaches to the Korean War, these novels address an American mainstream accustomed to Cold War norms of containment, and each seeks to contain this unruly war within well-worn generic and typological conventions – but in every case the war threatens to erupt out of these constraints.

Renouncing the War in *The Martyred*

Like Ty Pak, Richard E. Kim saw the war firsthand: he served in the South Korean military, and *The Martyred* is in part drawn from his experiences as a liaison to the U.S. Army. Set during the three-month occupation of Pyongyang, the northern capital, by South Korean, U.S., and UN forces in 1950, the novel presents a young South Korean intelligence officer ensnared in political and moral intrigues that ultimately detach him from his land and his people. *The Martyred* is a strange and elegant book, and Kim's tale was nothing like the published accounts of the conflict by American military personnel and journalists in the 1950s and 1960s. He kept the combat offstage and instead spun an inward drama of faithless existence. His protagonist transcended the proxy war to strike a deeper accord with an American readership, and, out of a neo-colonial relation, Kim fashioned an American consciousness.

Part of the occupying force, Captain Lee is assigned to a propaganda campaign: he is to orchestrate a memorial service for Christian ministers tortured and executed by Communist agents. It is his job to make political martyrs out of the murdered Christian clergymen. His superior officer, Colonel Chang, defends the propaganda office: he reiterates the campaign – “we are fighting this war for the glorious cause of our independence”² – and then spells out the alternative, the wretched truth that

this war is just like any other bloody war in the stinking history of idiotic mankind, that it is nothing but the sickening result of a blind struggle for power among the beastly states, among the rotten politicians and so on, that thousands of people have died and more will die in this stupid war, for nothing, for absolutely nothing, because they are just innocent

victims, helpless pawns in the arena of cold-blooded, calculating international power politics. (107)

In Chang's view, popular mobilization shelters the people from the larger context of the Cold War, which would render their hardship meaningless.

Colonel Chang's brutal assessment of the great power politics of the war – like the vicious images and machinations that erupt in Pak's stories – mark the hard truths that the propaganda campaign must exploit and conceal. Against these glimpses of the savagery and meaninglessness of the local conflict, Kim has constructed a moral fable, in which his young officer falls under the sway of Reverend Shin, the final minister to survive the Communist imprisonment. Over the course of the novel, we discover the truth that the reverend valiantly attempts to conceal: the failing of the martyred ministers, who begged for their lives and abjured their faith. In fact, Reverend Shin survived the capture because he was the only one to resist the enticements offered by their captors – but Shin falsely confesses to betraying the others in order to purify them. In a series of confessions, he recounts the torture suffered by the martyrs. Indeed, Shin parades the physical torment endured by his fellow clergyman in order to revive them.

A final, private confession between Reverend Shin and Captain Lee, however, binds the two men together. Shin reveals to Lee that the reverend does not believe in the Christian promise of redemption and sees nothing after death – a startling revelation that deeply moves the young captain. Yet even as Lee decries the campaign that Shin has pledged despite his lack of belief, Lee finds himself engaged in a campaign of falsehood that ultimately betrays the people that Shin sought to galvanize with spiritual succor: Captain Lee is complicit in a far more damaging maneuver – the impending military evacuation of Pyongyang, which will mark the end of the short-lived occupation of the northern capital. With the entry of Chinese soldiers into the war, Lee learns that a retreat from the north is imminent, but under orders from above he keeps secret the abandonment of the city, a fact that ultimately vitiates the ethical questions posed by the drama of the martyred Christian ministers.

The Martyred generates a structure of persecution and revival that its protagonist interrogates yet ultimately empties. The culmination of this hollowing-out of Christian redemption takes place when Lee finally departs from the city. He is part of the final convoy out of Pyongyang, after which the bridge out is bombed by American soldiers to halt enemy forces. As Lee nears the bridge, we hear Americans for the first time in the novel. Kim writes,

“English mingled with Korean. Planes flew overhead in the dark heavens” (182). Upon hearing “a series of shattering explosions,” we see the Americans:

A few parka-clad American soldiers in the truck ahead of my jeep were looking out of the canvas cover. A voice cried out, “There goes the God-damned bridge!” Another shouted, “Oh, Jesus! Look at that!” I got out of my jeep and looked back toward Pyongyang. The doomed city was in flames. (183)

In their loose, profane way, the American soldiers identify the city as the ultimate martyr, as Christ. The casual blasphemy of these American voices mimics and undercuts the narrative of martyrdom laid out in the novel. Pyongyang will burn, but it will never be redeemed. Kim’s novel ultimately reframes a political and military failure as an act of renunciation, tracing religious forms into profane content.

The grand narrative of renunciation garnered Kim extraordinary accolades, as in a review in the *Los Angeles Times* that applauded the novel for delving into a “second plane,” in which “we see these men as allegorical figures, taking their meaningful and symbolic roles in a modern passion play, roles with which we who live in the modern world play as well.”³ Such rave reviews of *The Martyred* propelled it up to number five on *The New York Times* best-seller list. The allegorical resonance of the novel freed its narrative from its minor setting; *The Martyred* was heralded for rising above the distant skirmish of Korea to blossom into a “modern passion play.” Kim’s lofty achievement was to transpose a faraway war into a Western key.

For a brief time, Richard Kim was hailed as “the most well-known Korean writer in the world”⁴ but his fame did not last and *The Martyred* fell into obscurity and out of print. Published in 1964, it preceded the ethnic nationalist movement of the late 1960s, when the term *Asian American* was born. And though Asian American studies has unearthed and claimed a growing canon of literary texts written before the movement, *The Martyred* has not been an obvious candidate for this body of literature. Kim depicts a very different kind of Asian American from the now-familiar minority subject fashioned out of a discourse of exclusion within the United States. Not only is the novel set in Korea, its protagonist is at best proto-American – yet the novel is entirely American, and its literary aspirations and existential sensibilities were not only recognized but also celebrated by American audiences.

Remarkably, after decades out of print, Penguin Classics reprinted *The Martyred* in 2011. In a foreword to the new edition, novelist Susan Choi recounts her own discovery of Kim’s forgotten work:

All these years walking around with a Korean last name, scribbling and publishing stories – and now just as success is in reach, this grandfather whom no one has mentioned turns out to have done it all first, and is crashing the party? Richard E. Kim had never been discussed at the Asian American reading group, he had never appeared on the syllabus. (xiii–xiv)

Never discussed at the Asian American reading group, never on the syllabus, yet reclaimed as a Penguin Classic – a fitting retrieval for a book that confounds the established category of Asian American literature. Choi's response to the book echoes the plaudits garnered in 1964: "In *The Martyred* Kim forges a drama of such devastating universality that an electrifying sense of recognition binds us to the page" (xiv–xv). The universality that Kim forged out of an existential frame electrifies all these years later.

Romancing the War in *The Foreign Student*

Susan Choi's appreciation of *The Martyred* underscored a universality that we may identify as an ambition of her own writing, and in *The Foreign Student* she wrote her father's experience of the war into an American romance. Choi's novel is replete with multiple tellings and retellings of the Korean War: she shows us the war not only through her father's eyes, but also in vivid renderings of American military history, in which Army officers come to life in the pages of her fiction. The novel performs a series of delicate acts of alliance, in which Korea is matched to the United States in both political and personal terms. Choi writes her protagonist into a revisionist history of the Korean War that attempts to reframe her father's service for the U.S. Information Service (USIS) as ultimately a means to a romantic union.

Choi's protagonist Chuck – so named by his boss in the USIS office – is a young Korean who graduates from working with the American propaganda office during the war to becoming a foreign student in Sewanee, Tennessee. The novel tacks between his wartime and American experiences, where he is made to explain an inexplicable conflict. Supported by a fellowship from the Episcopal Church Council, he must give lectures on the Korean War in churches across the American South. The war, however, resists his telling:

He always felt hopeless, called upon to deliver a clear explanation of the war. It defied explanation. Sometimes he simply skipped over causes, and began, "Korea is a shape just like Florida. Yes? The top half is a Communist state, and

the bottom half are fighting for democracy!” He would groundlessly compare the parallel to the Mason-Dixon line, and see every head nod excitedly. (51)

Chuck’s instinct for comparison echoes the strategy of American policy makers, who found it no less difficult to explain the war to a domestic audience, for whom the geopolitics of Asia remained a blur. From this groundless analogy, Chuck skips forward, to MacArthur’s Inchon landing: “He genuinely liked talking about the landing, and MacArthur. It all made for such an exciting, simple minded, morally unambiguous story” (52). From the Civil War to MacArthur, Chuck has cobbled together an uneven story meant to appeal to conservative American audiences, and in pandering to American self-interest – its civil war, its hero – he says nothing about his own experience of the war. His presentation is locked in the limbo between South Korean and American propaganda, and to his audience Chuck remains utterly inscrutable.

As Chuck stumbles through his presentation, the novel’s narration breaks into his speech to launch its own explanation of the war:

When the Japanese surrendered at the end of the war, the Soviets and the Americans split the job of overseeing the Japanese withdrawal from the Korean peninsula. A line was drawn at the thirty-eighth parallel, which split the country roughly in half. The Soviet military would administer the northern half, the Americans the southern. . . . The Soviets, on their side, enabled the return from exile of a great people’s hero, a revolutionary who had fought the Japanese throughout the thirties. Chuck cut himself short. (51)

Stepping in for Chuck’s more halting speech, this fluent rendering of the origins of the war shows Choi’s hand. Her account of the war closely accords with historian Bruce Cumings’s revisionist history,⁵ and her sketch of Kim Il Sung as “a great people’s hero” violates the political core of the propaganda Chuck must disseminate. Indeed, Choi’s intrusion lays bare the novel’s own desire to explain the Korean War, and the exigencies of Choi’s revisionist history lesson result in a striking melding of history and fiction.

Later in the text, the novel further embellishes the narration that cut into Chuck’s lecture:

When the fighting broke out, at four o’clock Sunday morning, the only American officer posted on the parallel was an undistinguished military adviser named Leo d’Addario who had not been granted weekend leave. . . . D’Addario leaped into his jeep, in his pajamas, and drove with his houseboy to Kaesong in the eerie dawn twilight to figure out what on earth all the firing was about, and on arriving ran smack into the North Korean army gliding into the center of town *on a train*. When they saw him, they shot at him.

Driving away, d'Addario's jeep blew a tire and, bouncing along on the rim, he bit off the end of his tongue. (93, original emphasis)

Choi's portrait of this hapless American officer puts her literary license on display. Painting American military history with the brush of her novelistic imagination, she portrays men stumbling into history, and her active retelling of the war ultimately situates her character within a lively critique of U.S. imperialism and military intervention. Choi accomplishes what her protagonist cannot: she writes against canned and incoherent accounts of the war to present a charged political context that animates and deeply wounds actual people.

In breathing life into history, however, *The Foreign Student* ultimately aims to free its protagonist from the war that overdetermines him. In addition to stepping in to fill out Chuck's sketchy presentation of the war, Choi writes him into a romance with a lonely Southern belle whose psychic wounds – albeit of a different order of magnitude – match Chuck's wartime scars. The novel carefully charts their separate lives as an overlaying geography. Both wander up and down a peninsula, a shared movement north and south that runs counter to the prevailing east-west axis of Orientalist romance and Cold War ideology. In thus casting its romance on a novel axis, *The Foreign Student* extricates its lovers from an Orientalist one; and in his desire for Katherine, Chuck identifies the true orientation of his endeavors:

His lust to master the language had never been abstract, no matter how fastidious and intellectual his approach might have seemed to observers. . . . It had gotten him into USIS, and across the ocean to Sewanee, and then, just as he was in danger of becoming apathetic from accomplishment, it had brought her within view. Every possibility of speech had been a possibility of speaking to her. (219)

Katherine marks the culmination of the trajectory from the USIS office in Korea to Sewanee because she offers the foreign student a glimpse into an undreamed-of existence: an attachment that transcends the war. Katherine protects Chuck from questions of political allegiance – she intervenes to pluck him away from an FBI interrogation – and Choi's portrait of Cold War America is a nostalgic postwar fantasy in which Katherine can safely confess to Chuck that “I don't know anything about the war” and he can assure her, “There is not much to know” (34).

Yet after the romance has come to its happy ending and Chuck is sheltered in Katherine's embrace, the novel drives toward a terrible revelation of Chuck's wartime experience. Chuck escaped military conscription by exploiting his USIS connections, but when he is later captured by National Police and

shipped to a detention center, he is suspected of being a spy because he has eluded conscription. Choi depicts nine days of torture in horrific detail and then shows us what remains of Chuck:

After this there was very little left of him. He mimicked his torturers, making himself deaf to his body's cries for help. His knowledge of his body propagated in chains, telephone lines, bridges between a limb and his love for it, coursing braids of communication wire. He sliced through lines and wires, exploded bridges, excised his mouth and his groin, amputated his limbs. He no longer knew when he urinated. Cast outside the boundary of itself, his body had ceased to obey any boundary between itself and the world. (309–10)

The conceit of the body as a destroyed city maps the war's devastation onto Chuck, an allegory that reinscribes back into the war a protagonist seemingly freed from it. If *The Martyred* transcended its wartime context in 1964, Choi's late-twentieth-century war story locks her characters within the conflict. Her literary devices are deployed in the service of reanimating a forgotten war, whether through breathing life into historical figures or presenting the unimaginable through a sustained image.

In thus presenting the history and horror of the Korean War, Susan Choi refuses to make her father's character a dupe of the Americans or to imbue him with an anachronistic political resistance. Instead, she submits American history to her writerly wiles – and the excesses of her narration foreground her presence. Her extension of her father's church lectures ultimately provides a critique of American intervention only available to the second generation, and in lodging her father's wartime memories within an imagined romance Choi has built a literary scaffolding to support an alien figure. Yet this structure is not always commensurate with her protagonist, as Chuck notes when he describes Katherine's presence in his solitary existence as “his sense that she was watching from afar, with a constant and transforming attention, as if his life were an American movie and she were his audience. He'd felt ennobled and remade. Yet he was full of immutable stuff” (285). Chuck's extraordinary suffering during the war is the immutable stuff that remains beyond Katherine's reach, and Choi's rendering of it transports us out of her meticulously crafted narrative.

Repeating the War in *The Surrendered*

If *The Foreign Student* attempts to free its protagonist from the war, Chang-Rae Lee's *The Surrendered* locks its main characters within the war. Indeed, the novel is a typological exploration of three figures shaped by the Korean

War: the war orphan, the GI, and an angel of mercy who at once unites and divides them. The novel self-consciously writes against sentimental accounts of merciful American intervention at the time of the Korean War – but in quite literally writing against type, the characters that emerge are unlikely and ultimately unreal figures. Their perpetually underscored status as fictional fantasies infects the wartime context of the novel with an unreality that renders the war a curiously depoliticized backdrop for their repeating, empty acts.

The Surrendered opens with its eleven-year-old orphan in the early days of the war, as she is desperately shepherding her younger twin siblings onto a train. Their schoolteacher father has been falsely denounced and murdered as a Communist, their older brother conscripted, and their mother and older sister killed in a flash of artillery. On their own, the three children join in a stream of refugees hollowed by – and inured to – suffering. In order to survive, June wishes to steel herself: “Now, after all that had happened, she thought she could suffer seeing most anything, whatever cruelty or disaster, but the notes of a human plaint would make her wish she could exist without a heart” (8). June’s story unfolds to test her wish: her survival depends upon a heartlessness that she clings to, even after the war. On the train, June loses her siblings: precariously perched on top of a car, the young children fall off when the train lurches to a halt. June finds her sister dead, and as the train starts up again, she abandons her terribly wounded brother. Seen through June’s steely gaze, the war’s myriad tragedies are rendered unremarkable – a tendency that infects the whole of the narration.

At the end of the war, June encounters an American GI who leads her to an orphanage. June does not recognize the American as her savior. Instead, she sees him “as the herald of death, finally come to embrace her” (56), and she attempts to run away, only to slip into sinking mud. The American soldier saves her:

But then she could breathe; he’d plucked her up from the mud by her shirt, ripping a sleeve at the shoulder. She hit him in the chest and tried to scratch his eyes but in a flash he struck her back; when she came to she was lying in the shade of a rusted truck carcass that had been pushed off the road, some thirty meters from where they had been. The side of her face stung. But her shirt was still on, and her trousers were as well, and the American was sitting on the metal frame of the seats, torn out of the truck cab, chewing on a stalk of hay. . . .

“Take it easy, sister,” he said. (57)

This meeting between orphan and GI is a far cry from the sympathetic scenes of rescue presented in popular American magazines and films of the period.

The orphan strikes her savior, who hits her back, and their encounter is poised between rescue and rape.

Though the American soldier saves the Korean orphan, he remains detached and dispassionate. Once the threat of rape is quelled, both orphan and GI merely seem to be playing their parts: the GI goes on to lure the orphan with a pack of gum; the orphan follows, but at a wary distance. Devoid of the affecting hallmarks typical of such scenes, this GI and orphan merely trudge ahead. Both shoulder roles that neither fully inhabits. Strikingly, the GI's hailing of June as "sister" names her role. She will not be adopted over the course of the novel, and she remains the sister who has abandoned her siblings. Her character is defined by the moment of leaving her brother behind and running alone for the train. In fact, though a significant portion of the story is devoted to June in middle age, when she is a widow in America seeking a runaway son, her story returns again and again to her solitary run and the book closes with this defining moment: "She was running for the train. . . . In defiance she leaned forward and cried out, suspending her breath, and reached for the dark edge of the door. The world fell away. Someone had pulled her up. Borne her in. She was off her feet, alive" (469).

If Lee's war orphan is a child heartless enough to survive the war, his American soldier – the GI who rescued June – is a literal poster boy for the U.S. military. The preternaturally handsome Hector, we discover, is virtually immortal, and he remains physically unscathed by the war. The novel frames Hector's wartime service within the two years of grinding trench warfare that followed the sweeping attacks and retreats of the war's first months:

After the chaotic opening to the war, the initial Communist invasion, and the headlong ROK [Republic of Korea] retreat to the very southern tip of the peninsula, and then the breakneck American counteroffensive pushing back all the way north to the Yalu River, which was the border with China, both sides were now engaged in what was in essence trench warfare, if in the hills. . . . The fighting was mostly night attacks, with small-scale raids by American and ROK units, and then operations by the Communists, who were now almost all Chinese, regulars in the People's Army, attacking often in mass, near-suicidal, waves, their aim to intimidate and overwhelm with seemingly inexhaustible numbers. (67)

This depiction of hillside struggles, with its parenthetical commentary, registers the pervasive cynicism among American soldiers, and Lee's description of the masses of Chinese soldiers follows popular accounts, which repeatedly depicted vast "hordes."

Hector's wartime experience in Korea opens a dark trench that locks him forever within the war. He stays on in Korea after 1953 to work as a handyman at the orphanage that shelters June, and once back in the states, he works as a janitor in a run-down mall managed by a slovenly Korean American named Jung, who calls him "GI":

Jung had been calling him GI since learning that Hector had been in the Korean War, or else called him Joe, or Rambo, something else Hector would have never suffered from anyone else but didn't mind from Jung. In fact he took a small pleasure in the idea that more than thirty years of tumultuous world history should presently lead to a moment like this, for him to be dressed in cheap coveralls, mop in hand, preparing to clean the toilets of a grubby Korean mall in New Jersey for this most slothful of their kind, a man who was, literally, born in a roadside ditch during the war but didn't remotely know or care a thing about it now. (102)

Fixed in his wartime role by a man born from it, Hector indulges and even protects Jung because he appreciates their relationship as a kind of atonement for his service in Korea. Musing over the Korean War from this distance, Hector concludes that "it was a war that from the beginning had been nobody's cross, inciting only mild attacks of patriotism and protest, jingoism and pacifism, a war both too cold and too hot and that managed to erase fifty thousand of his kind and over a million of theirs" (99). This conclusion has little to say about the ethics or politics of the conflict that killed so many – and if *The Martyred* presented the war as a charged setting for a morality play and *The Foreign Student* as a means of animating a revised history of the war, *The Surrendered* seems to have both comprehended and grown weary of these uses. Instead, in Lee's rendering, the war metes out roles that remain in place long after the end of active fighting.

At the heart of *The Surrendered*, however, is a charged memory of an earlier conflict shot through with ethical and political concerns. In addition to the war orphan and the American soldier, Lee presents a third type born from war: Sylvie, the American minister's wife who tends to the orphans, "a mother and a lover and a kind of child" (312) who captivates both June and Hector and, in the absence of sympathy between these figures, binds them together. The novel delves into Sylvie's past to recount the death of her missionary parents at the hands of Japanese imperial soldiers in Manchuria in 1934 – a sequence that peddles in the political valor and moral choices sorely missing in Lee's account of the Korean War. In striking contrast to "a war that from the beginning had been nobody's cross," Lee presents Manchuria in the 1930s as a roiling political stage in which "The Japanese were becoming more and more brutal as they drove to make permanent their grip on the region" (193). The novel's

evocation of Manchukuo – Imperial Japan’s name for the captured territory – in fact echoes the political analogy espoused by Truman’s administration as a justification for Korea as a preventive strike against a third world war, yet Lee offers no substantial continuity between these two historical moments. Instead, the political conviction of the 1930s seems to have drained away in 1950s Korea, which is not presented as a dangerous political arena but only as incoherent and dispiriting destruction.

Sylvie, the novel’s angel of mercy, ultimately does not belong to the Korean War. Unlike the orphan and GI – both of whom she attends and succors, to her detriment – the minister’s wife does not survive her stint in Korea. She perishes in a fire at the orphanage, but Sylvie was in fact never fully alive in this setting; she lost her innocence in 1930s Manchuria, in the run-up to the Pacific War, and it is this past of painful allegiance and wartime sacrifice that casts Sylvie into an object of desire for both June and Hector. In Lee’s hands, their more difficult characters are impossible inversions of well-known emblems of American benevolence and Korean dependence – and the strange war that created them is “nobody’s cross.”

Conclusion

The three major Korean American literary works explored in this chapter are all vexed attempts to render the politics and brutality of a forgotten war. In all three instances, the war is a frame for generating dramatic literary acts – and each bid to forge universal literary gestures out of the battlefield registers a formal remove from it. Perhaps because the war has yet to be assigned a critical place within Asian American studies, it remains particularly open to myriad literary renderings – and, indeed, even ripe for them, as evidenced by significant interest in the Korean War in recent novels by canonical American writers (such as Toni Morrison, Philip Roth, and Jayne Anne Philips). The remarkable surge in literary remembrances of this forgotten war is part of a larger popular and scholarly interest in the 1950s as a landmark decade for stylistic and political consolidation. The seductions of mid-century style have also led toward the dark recess of Korea, and the difficulties of registering this war in the period have enticed these eminent authors: buried under the seeming prosperity and consensus of mid-century, the Korean War presents a singular puzzle.

A generation ago, Ty Pak’s toughened journalistic eye showed us what these major novels cannot: a war that refuses to be harnessed in the service of moral fables, romances, or literary reversals. The war twists away from his writing of

it – and its legacy can disrupt, even from the sidelines. One of the most striking remembrances of the war appears in Heinz Insu Fenkl’s 1997 autobiographical novel, *Memories of My Ghost Brother*. He notes that his mother

had grown up during the Korean War, when the entire country was devastated, when ten million families were separated forever as they fled from refuge to refuge on roads lined with the dead. But my mother’s memories of the war often surprised me. “It’s the most fun you can ever have in life,” she once said to me, “as long as you don’t get killed.”⁶

His mother’s hardened sense of adventure simply undoes the book’s tragic frame of war; for her, the war is not a narrative of desolation but of exhilarating and vicious possibility. Fenkl is the child of a union between a soldier of the occupying military force and his local bride in this outpost of the Cold War, and his memoir provides a rarely seen glimpse of a military camp town – but his mother’s memories hint at an experience of the war that has nothing to do with the geopolitics of imperial and civil conflict. And just as her stories cannot be registered by her son’s writerly voice, the war has eluded the generations that followed – even as its imprint persists.

Notes

- 1 Ty Pak, *Guilt Payment* (Honolulu, HI: Bamboo Ridge, 1983), 111–12. Further references in parentheses in the text.
- 2 Richard Kim, *The Martyred* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 106. Further references in parentheses in the text.
- 3 Robert R. Kirsch, “Korean War Story Deserves to Be Classed as Great Novel,” *Los Angeles Times* (February 23, 1964): C14.
- 4 James Kyung-Jin Lee, “Best-Selling Korean American: Revisiting Richard E. Kim,” *Korean Culture* (Spring 1998): 30.
- 5 Daniel Y. Kim observes that “in her critical approach to the American policies that led to the war and exacerbated its violence, Choi seems to have drawn from the account that Bruce Cumings put forward in his landmark two-volume study, *The Origins of the Korean War*” (559). See Kim, “‘Bled In, Letter by Letter’: Translation, Postmemory, and the Subject of Korean War: History in Susan Choi’s *The Foreign Student*,” *American Literary History* 21.3 (2009): 550–83.
- 6 Heinz Insu Fenkl, *Memories of My Ghost Brother* (New York: Plume, 1997), 138.

The American War in Viet Nam and Its Diasporas

ANH THANG DAO-SHAH AND ISABELLE THUY PELAUD

In February 1991, in a public address to the nation President George Bush declared enthusiastically: “By God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all.” This remark, uttered merely hours after the fighting of the first Iraq war had stopped, demonstrates the lingering effects of the Viet Nam War in the national imagination of the United States. Regardless of what Bush wanted us to believe, the term “Viet Nam War” continues to resurface in journalistic and political accounts about the U.S. military conflicts in the Middle East. The Viet Nam War, according to scholar John Carlos Rowe, has been “the most chronicled, documented, reported, filmed, taped, and – in all likelihood – narrated war in the history” of the United States and continues to persist in the American imagination.¹ In the United States, the war is referred to as the Viet Nam War, a name that has been criticized by Vietnamese American scholars and writers for displacing and reducing the people and country of Viet Nam to an adjective used to describe an American military conflict.² In contemporary Viet Nam, the war is referred to as the War Against America (to save the country), a nomenclature that ignores the perspective of South Vietnamese who fought alongside the American army. Within the context of competing claims to memory, in this chapter we use the phrase “the American War in Viet Nam,” which was introduced by scholars such as Viet Thanh Nguyen and Christina Schwenkel to emphasize the inequality of representations of war and its legacy.³ To what extent, then, has the American War in Viet Nam affected and shaped the literature produced by Vietnamese writers of the diaspora? To frame diasporic Vietnamese literature in relation to this war is not the same as to assert that these representations constitute the full story of what has occurred in the past, however, or to claim that the war is the only event determining the experience of diasporic Vietnamese. Instead, by foregrounding Vietnamese writers of the diaspora and their works we attempt to make clear that memory is always a space of contest and struggle, in which who tells the story matters.

Representations of the refugees of the American War in Viet Nam clash with and complicate how the war *and* Vietnamese cultural productions have been understood both in Viet Nam and in the countries to which Vietnamese people resettled after April 30, 1975. While the literature born from those experiences enhances current understanding of the war and its aftermath, writers have also consciously moved away from this framework to highlight other sociohistorical contexts and struggles. They are reacting in part to the expectation that they can only represent the community's memories of the War. An analysis of diasporic Vietnamese literature must not therefore neglect the tension between the literature, the diasporic community addressed by these writers, *and* the mainstream society of the countries of settlement, which continue to define the writers and their literature as representative of the war.⁴

By Vietnamese writers of the diaspora, we refer to authors who emerged from refugee communities whose displacement from Viet Nam was the result of the American War in Viet Nam.⁵ Their experiences and processes of self-identification differ from those of Asian immigrants who immigrated by choice. In the process of forced migration following the war, many South Vietnamese refugees lost their homes, social status, family, and social networks. Thousands were incarcerated in reeducation camps for years before they finally managed to leave. Upon arriving in their countries of settlement they struggled to rebuild their lives in these foreign places, many of which have a vexed relationship with Viet Nam because of the outcome of the war. At the same time, they also faced various degrees of racism and xenophobia, which are reflected by those countries' historical relationships with their own minority communities. Given the context of forced departure, it is no coincidence that memories of the war play a significant role in Vietnamese literature in the diaspora. The end of the war marked the beginning of their losses and also the birth of new communities.

In this chapter, we focus on five writers of the 1.5 and second generation, who are located in the United States, Canada, France, and Australia. This is a strategic choice that allows us to articulate a specific lens to discuss this rich and heterogeneous body of work. First, although the war plays an important role in Vietnamese literature in the diaspora, not all writers are impacted by those memories in the same way. While the first generation wrote about nostalgia and homeland politics, those who came as children have a more complex relation with these memories. The war also features differently in works written in Vietnamese and in the language of the host country. Thus, the writers discussed in this section do not represent the body of literature of the community in a specific geographic location. Rather they represent the work

of a generation of writers whose works are influenced by the first generation's mourning of the past, while actively promoting alternative memories that connect the experiences of Vietnamese refugees in the diaspora with those of immigrants and other people of color. These engagements articulate new concepts of home and citizenship that challenge how America and other countries of settlement view and define themselves. It is worth noticing that many of these writers are controversial figures in their own communities because they depart from the communal and societal expectations of what Vietnamese writers in the diaspora should write about – the war, Vietnamese refugees as victims, or nostalgia for the home country.

This strategic choice also reflects an often-neglected fact that the American War in Viet Nam, despite its name, was a multisided war that involved many countries. One impetus for the United States to be militarily involved with Viet Nam was to assist France to maintain its century-long colonial hold in Viet Nam. Australia, although it was not officially at war with Viet Nam, sent sixty thousand military personnel there. This move resulted in a national controversy that in part led to a change of government. And although Canada was a safe haven for American draft resisters, about thirty thousand Canadians volunteered to fight in Viet Nam while the Canadian war industry sold \$2.47 billion worth of war materials to the United States during the war, including ammunition, napalm, and Agent Orange. Because of their direct involvement in Viet Nam, the United States, France, Australia, and Canada received the largest number of Vietnamese refugees after the war ended.⁶ The international nature of the war means that Vietnamese refugees often experienced the separation and dispersal of their family and community to different parts of the world, and had to maintain familial ties across national borders for decades after the war.

Lastly, within this context, the focus on a few authors who are located in the four primary geographic locations of the Vietnamese diaspora allows us to study this body of literature within a diasporic framework, which is both productive and necessary. This lens makes visible the correlation between territorial-nationalistic and psychological-ideological (dis)locations, and points to the constitutive role memory plays in identity formations. Borrowing from Stuart Hall's notion of strategic *positioning*, we regard diasporic identities as linked to what he calls situation-specific *becoming*, rather than being the products of bipolar nation-states.⁷

The context of war and forced migration to different parts of the world, within which these works were produced, also compels us to examine diasporic Vietnamese texts across national boundaries within the framework of

compounded trauma. Cathy Caruth defines this concept as “the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena.”⁸ She explains, “Much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche, it is always the story of a wound that cries out that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked to only what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language” (4). This framework of trauma as linked to the unknown in action and language allows us to examine the ways the writers address the memories of the American War in Viet Nam as a gateway into other sociohistorical and individual memories that equally shape this literature. Displacement, memory, and the refusal to occupy constrained creative spaces are common themes in these works, often expressed through fragmented forms and nonlinear narratives. At the same time the way the trauma of war is articulated and digested varies depends on the country of residence’s own history with Viet Nam, its national and regional culture, its relationship to immigrants of color, and the writers’ relationship with their community. While the U.S. writer Andrew Pham and Canadian Kim Thuy emphasize their refugee experiences and the continuous navigation between the homeland and the country of settlement, French author Linda Le alludes to the impact of colonization, war, and the universal theme of loss and alienation. Moving away from the framework of the refugee story, Australian writer Nam Le and U.S. writer Monique Truong connect the experience of Vietnamese refugees with stories of loss, dispersal, and identity from other communities and populations across the world to highlight the human cost of war and social conflicts. Looking at these authors and their works within the frameworks of trauma and diaspora allows us to challenge the way the American War in Viet Nam has been used as the single framework to understand the experiences and culture of Vietnamese in different parts of the world, while highlighting the importance of literature in providing understanding about the legacy of war and other acts of violence.

Andrew X. Pham

Andrew X. Pham is one of the most well-known writers of the 1.5-generation Vietnamese American writers. His first novel, *Catfish and Mandala: A Two-Wheeled Voyage through the landscape and Memory of Vietnam* (1999), recounts a one-year-long road trip of the narrator, a 1.5-generation

Vietnamese American as he travels by bicycle on the U.S. West Coast, Japan, and Viet Nam. His second book, *The Eaves of Heaven: A Life in Three Wars* (2009), is a fictionalized account written from the viewpoint of the author's father, Thong Van Pham, who lived through three wars: the war with the French colonizers, the war with Japan during World War I, and the war with the Americans. Pham is also the translator of *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace* (2008), which garnered much attention in both the United States and Viet Nam when it was published.

Separated by a decade, Pham's two books offer a different perspective on the history of Vietnamese Americans through a narrative of family tragedies steeped in public and personal memories. Reaching back beyond the American War in Viet Nam, they highlight how collective trauma can impact multiple generations. Written in fragmented form, the novels waver between different times and space, illustrating the way that traumas from the past cannot be fully separated from the present. In *Catfish and Mandala*, the family's story of displacement by boat and the narrator's father's imprisonment in a reeducation camp resurface at random moments, triggered at familiar locations on the road to drive both the narrator's narrative and his journey to forget about the past. In *The Eaves of Heaven*, two narratives run parallel to reveal the father's experiences in the North of Viet Nam during the war against French colonialism and during the American War in Viet Nam in the South.

Read together, the nonlinear narrative allows us to glimpse how the trauma affecting the life of the narrator in Pham's first novel is not only attributed to the American War in Viet Nam, but must be understood within the context of both the racial history of the United States and a longer history of war and colonialism in Viet Nam. In *Catfish and Mandala* the effects of the trauma of displacement are intensified by the experiences of being a refugee and an ethnic and racialized subject in the United States. Because Vietnamese American experiences and memories fail to resonate in both the United States and Viet Nam, the narrator's individuality is not seen. In order to avoid the effects of racialization and also the limitation that comes with the identification of himself as Vietnamese American, he assumes an identity marked by ambivalence, contradictions, and the vacillation between the embrace and the rejection of others. The lenses through which he views the world resist stereotypes of the emasculated Asian American man, the romanticization of ethnic roots, and the model minority myth. The simultaneous association with groups to which he does not feel he fully belongs, however, creates a sense of vulnerability, which affects the narrator throughout the book.

This sense of marginality is compounded by a family history of domestic violence, poverty, and multiple traumatic memories about the departure from Viet Nam, to which the narrator continuously returns even as he is trying to move away. Within this context, the depiction of the hardships and seemingly impossible choices of daily life of the author's father during the three wars in Viet Nam in *Eaves of Heaven* provides a framework to understand the experience of Vietnamese Americans within a larger historical context. In addition to decentering America in the narrative of Viet Nam, Pham's second book shows that the American War in Viet Nam was situated along a continuum of French colonialism and cold war policies, which led to multiple displacements and the rupture of social and familial relationships. Consequently, the experience of Vietnamese Americans is impacted by an accumulative and collective trauma, which was intensified by the war, yet which cannot be defined by it.

Kim Thuy

Although Canada has one of the largest Vietnamese diasporic communities, Kim Thuy is one of few writers who has gained international acknowledgment for her first novel, *Ru* (2009), which centers on the trauma of the refugee experience. Though less known outside of Canada, her next two novels *A toi* (2011), coauthored with Pascal Jonavjak, and *Man* (2013) continue her exploration of the life of immigrants in French Canada through mundane stories of love and friendships in Montreal and the reflections between a Franco-Slovakian-Suisse and a Quebec Vietnamese writer about what it means to be uprooted. Like Andrew Pham, Kim Thuy begins with the trauma of war and displacement only to make clear in her next works how the framework of the refugee narrative is inadequate to fully explore the experience of diasporic Vietnamese.

Like many works by minority authors, *Ru* was marketed as a fictional account of the author's experiences (2009). The narrator of *Ru* is a Vietnamese woman whose family left Viet Nam by boat when she was a child. As the author makes clear at the beginning of the book, the title is a bilingual play on a word: in Vietnamese *Ru* means lullaby, while in French it is something akin to stream or flow (such as flow of tears, blood, and/or money). Written in a fragmented form, the narrative is broken in vignettes that go back and forth in time. Central to this narrative is the trope of constant movement, or restlessness and the anticipation of inevitable ruptures. "I never leave a place with more than one suitcase. . . . Nothing else can become truly mine," the narrator explains.⁹

Ru's fragmented structure and the main theme of movement, resonate with Pham's *Catfish and Mandala*, suggesting that the nonlinear form is often employed by diasporic Vietnamese writers to deal with the question of fragmented identity and to document repeated attempts at reconstructing it through the process of remembering. Like the narrator of *Catfish and Mandala*, the protagonist of *Ru* does not trust others. Uprooted from her country when she is ten years old and having experienced the fear of death numerous times, she says she chooses to be on "the side, in the shadow" (109).

Yet, in *Ru*, the trauma that continues to reemerge in the life of the narrator cannot be attributed to one catastrophic moment. Instead, different kinds of fears, which result from the war and the displacement process, resurface intermittently once constant movement has ceased. They come as images that a child cannot put into words, but that, as an adult, the narrator must learn to reconstruct and articulate in order to construct her own identity in the new land. She remembers, for instance, that the fear of communism was akin to the fear of death. Had the family been captured by communist soldiers or by pirates, her father would have given the family cyanide pills. As she later recalls, "fear transformed into a monster with one hundred faces, one that was cutting through legs, did not allow us to feel the pain of our immobilized muscles. We were fixated in fear, by fear" (15). In this case, the restlessness and fears are passed down from one generation to the next, having an impact on the life of the narrator even after the war and the movement has ceased.

Her next two novels, however, move away from these familiar tropes of the refugee narrative, and to a certain extent, from the Vietnamese experience. Employing the same fragmented form as *Ru*, *A Toi* and *Man* explore a more universal immigrant experience in French Canada through vignettes about love, life, and rootlessness. Together, the three novels provide a larger context to understand the trauma explored in *Ru*. On one hand, the experience of the Vietnamese refugee becomes one example of the multiple traumatic experiences of immigrants in Montreal and Quebec. On the other hand, they also suggest that the experience of rootlessness of the narrator in *Ru* is both the result of a compound collective trauma from war and the refugee passage and the result of the settlement process in a new country, marked by racial and class relations.

It is perhaps significant to note that neither *A Toi* nor *Man*, both of which were marketed as novels, received as much critical and public attention as *Ru*, which is known more as a fictionalized account of the writer's real life experiences. While the evaluation of a literary work always depends on multiple factors, the lack of attention also points at the way that works by diasporic

Vietnamese authors are still expected to represent the community's history of war and displacement. Therefore, any attempt to depart from this framework will be seen as inauthentic and, consequently, of less value. This tension between the authors' desire to complicate the understanding of a Vietnamese diasporic experience and the expectation of the host society is an issue that other writers discussed in this chapter also grapple with.

Monique Truong

To expect diasporic Vietnamese authors to write only about the American War in Viet Nam and their memories of escape obscures the humanity of the community they are seen to represent and can reduce members of the group to the role of passive victims paralyzed by grief. In both of her best-selling novels, Monique Truong, one of the most accomplished Vietnamese American writers, actively resists telling a refugee narrative to present different facets of the Vietnamese experience in the diaspora. Truong's first novel, *The Book of Salt*, follows the story of Binh, a Vietnamese man who works as a cook for Gertrude Stein and her partner, Alice B. Toklas, in 1930s Paris. Tracing Binh's displacement from Viet Nam under French colonialism to the household of the famous expatriate writer in Paris, *The Book of Salt* explores the experience of diasporic Vietnamese outside the context of the American War in Viet Nam, while highlighting the racial discourse that has an impact on both the course of the war and the treatment of Vietnamese refugees afterward. In the novel, the relationship between Binh and Stein and Toklas is governed by both the colonial relationship between France and Viet Nam and Stein's desire to consume the cook's experience, his suffering, and his trauma, which are born from his position as a queer colonial subject. Moving away from the context of the United States and the framework of displacement after the Viet Nam War, *The Book of Salt* highlights how the experiences of diasporic Vietnamese can also be understood within a larger context of war and displacement, which has always formed an important part of Vietnamese history.

Truong's second novel *Bitter in the Mouth* uses a different strategy to speak against the expectation placed on Vietnamese American writers to tell a story of war and displacement. In order for the protagonist to be seen without being judged at the onset by predetermined images associated with the American War in Viet Nam and her race, the author masks the narrator's Vietnamese ethnic background for about two-thirds of the story. The narrative focuses instead on an internal difference called synaesthesia, a rare condition whereby stimulation of one sense triggers sensation of another. The narrator Linda,

who lives in the American South during the late 1970s and early 1980s, associates words with the tastes of food. This difference profoundly affects her life, forcing her to seek comfort in her gay great-uncle Baby Harper and her overweight girlfriend Kelly, both of whom were also outcasts of their community.

The author's choice to disclose Linda Hammerick's official name, Linh-Dao Nguyen Hammerick, a name that reveals both her ethnic and racial identity, midway through the novel has been the most controversial aspect of the book. Reviewers lamented that such an important aspect of the narrator's life simply cannot be withheld from the readers for that long. Others seem disappointed, claiming that such revelation does not provide the grand finale that the readers would expect.¹⁰ Such strong reaction to Truong's decision to hide Linda's racial and ethnic identity and instead introduce her to the reader first through her other marker of otherness is telling about the expectation placed on a Vietnamese American author writing about Vietnamese in the United States. Truong's perceived failure is the result of her refusal to follow the narrative of war, displacement, and adaptation that readers would expect from a Vietnamese American story.

Yet, read alongside *The Book of Salt*, Truong's second novel forms an alternative archive and narrative of Vietnamese diasporic experiences; it displaces the war in order to highlight other kinds of trauma that equally have an impact on the life of Vietnamese diasporic subjects. In both novels, the author chooses to highlight an internal difference of the narrator over a physical one, which allows for the representation of a more complex character. In the case of Binh, his sexuality is the reason he had to leave Viet Nam; in the case of Linda, it is her condition of synaesthesia that made her an outcast for most of her life. For both narrators, the moment of belonging takes places when they find other people who are also marked by their difference in the society.

In both novels, however, these markers of difference, together with race and ethnicity also emerge as a source of trauma that forces them to hide out of fear and the desire to protect themselves. This propensity to hide is, the novels suggests, an outcome of being lodged at the intersection of the trauma of everyday life *and* of the incommensurability of a large-scale event. The experiences of Binh and Linda are impacted by their internal differences, the racial relationship of the society in which they live and the history of colonialism and war. In both novels, Truong emphasizes the repositories of feelings and emotions of what Ann Cvetkovich calls the various forms of love, rage, intimacy, grief, and shame. These feelings are associated with layers of undesirable or unseen differences, which are often perceived by the society with prejudice or ignorance. The differences are also manifested through evasion,

forgetting, and dissociation from the self that remains “unspeakable and un-representable.”¹¹ In displacing the American War in Viet Nam as the single event shaping the experience of Vietnamese diasporic subjects, Truong’s works emphasize how multiple histories and memories of the public and personal kind collide to reveal the story of the Vietnamese diaspora.

Linda Lê

Linda Lê is one of the most internationally recognized authors of the Vietnamese diaspora. A productive writer, she published eighteen novels and nonfiction essay collections by 2012. Lê has received five national prizes in France and her works have been translated into multiple languages.¹² So far, only two novels, *Calomnies* and *Les Trois Parques*, have been translated into English under the titles *Slander* and *The Three Fates*. However, Lê’s experimental forms and use of multiple viewpoints, as well as a sense of darkness in her writing have caught the attention of literature critics in many countries, paving the way for more translations and popular attention.

Like other minority and female authors, Lê’s novels are often read in light of her autobiography. Critics have drawn a parallel between the recurring figure of the abandoned father in many of her works and the author’s separation from her own father. Others point out that her novel *Lettres Mortes* was inspired by Lê’s experiences in an asylum after the death of her father. However, in her interviews, the author refuses to categorize her books as autobiographical. Instead, she claims that what she wants to emphasize is the universal feeling of loss of those who are rootless.

Lê’s writing, like that of Monique Truong, exceeds the refugee narrative, which focuses primarily on the passage from Viet Nam and the struggles in the new country, and ends with the refugee’s settlement in the new homeland. Instead, in *Slander*, the author weaves together the history of French colonization, the American War in Viet Nam as well as the exchange of power at the end of the war that led to a mass refugee exodus by sea in leaking riverboats.¹³ At the same time, *Slander* also explores the racial politics of France toward its former colonized people, which affect the lives of the two narrators as much as the lingering memories of war and a lost country. Written in fragmented form, which refuses chronology and spatial logic, *Slander* moves back and forth between the narrative of the niece and her struggles as a writer in France, on the one hand, and the uncle’s experience under war-torn Viet Nam and the sanatorium outside Paris, on the other. Evoking the trauma of colonialism, war, and racism, *Slander* challenges the linear character of history

writing, pointing instead at the way that life in the diaspora is simultaneously shaped by the aftermath of different historical processes.

One recurrent theme that highlights the complexity of the diasporic experience is the complicated relationship between the author and the notion of homeland, which is best illustrated through her use of an anonymous "Country." Though Lê often uses this abstraction as an example of her refusal to write autobiographical works, she addresses the way the lost homeland continues to haunt the uprooted person in *Tu écriras sur le Bonheur*. "I carry my country like this young peasant carries his twin's fetus," Lê writes. "It is a monstrous link. A link in which the native country, the twin, is protected and suffocated, recognized and denied, and finally carried just as one carries a dead child."¹⁴ Using a monstrous metaphor of the vestigial twin, the author speaks to the parasitic relationship between the one being uprooted and the homeland she has left behind, yet which continues to plague her life through unfulfilled desires and traumatic memories, not only of the war, but also other historical moments that shaped the experiences of those living in the diaspora.

Like *Slander*, *The Three Fates* lacks any division into chapters and boasts long paragraphs, which move through times and space as the narrator wanders between memories of the Fall of Saigon and present day. The fragmented form allows for multiple points of view and an impossibility of distinguishing between different times and spaces, reflecting the ways that trauma of war can return as recurrent flashbacks at unexpected moments. In *The Three Fates*, Lê turns on her uprooted characters, the two sisters and a cousin who managed to get away from a falling Saigon with their grandmother, while leaving behind the sisters' father. In streams of consciousness, which translate Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Vietnamese legends into the diasporic context, Lê exposes how the war and the displacement that follows its end haunt those who left not only with unfulfilled desires but also endless resentment and survivors' guilt. As the sisters plot to bring their father to France, the reader also realizes the extent to which the diaspora and its uprooted inhabitants have the ability to impact the lives of those whom they have left behind. Full of sarcasm and irony, *The Three Fates* explores the trauma of war through the incessant whispers of the dead grandmother, who until her dying day curses the enemy and the father for stealing her home, her land, and her faith, while the sisters try to make up for their survival through the relentless effort to reunite with their lost father. Unable to avoid the constant resurfacing of the past, the sisters escape into their obsessive-compulsive materialist drive to escape the guilt of having gotten away. Yet, the figure of the cousin, the principal narrator of the book who is missing a hand, also suggests that those who are uprooted are

able to develop an alternative understanding of the past, present, and future through a consciousness formed through the pain and trauma of war and displacement.

Nam Le

Boasting one of the largest Vietnamese diasporic populations, Australia has a sizeable body of Vietnamese diasporic literature. The majority of these works, however, was written in Vietnamese by first-generation diasporics and therefore remains inaccessible to the mainstream audience in Australia and other countries. Within this context, the success of Nam Le's debut publication *The Boat* came as a surprise even for the author. Born in Viet Nam, Le immigrated with his family to Melbourne, Australia in 1979, when he was only one year old. Like Monique Truong, he pursued a legal career, appeasing his parents' demand for a secure profession before turning to literature. *The Boat*, a collection of seven short stories, was published simultaneously in Australia, Canada, and the United States in 2008 and quickly gathered favorable critical support. It has been translated into fifteen languages and has won multiple national and international awards, including the prestigious Australian Prime Minister's Literary Award in 2009.

Though the title of the book suggests a familiar motif of the refugee narrative, *The Boat* moves beyond the framework of the American War in Viet Nam to connect the experiences of Vietnamese refugees with the struggles of other populations and people who have been affected by war and different kinds of violence. Moving between Viet Nam, the United States, Colombia, Tehran, New York, and Hiroshima, to tell the stories of hit men, refugee fathers, and lost children, the book opens up the cartography of Vietnamese diasporic literature, challenging the spatial and thematic constraints placed on Vietnamese diasporic writers. Indeed, while the titular short story, "The Boat," which closes the collection, deals with the traumatic displacement process on the infamous boat, the first story of the collection, "Love and Honor and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice," makes clear the impossibility of writing about such experiences.

In a satiric autobiographical move, "Love and Honor and Pity" opens with a young Vietnamese writer being urged by his classmates to turn his father's experience of warfare, imprisonment, and refuge into his final short story for the semester. Struggling with the silences that govern their relationship, the son writes down the fragmented memories of his father, which he managed to gather throughout the years during the father's drunken conversations with

his countrymen. On one hand, “Love and Honor and Pity” makes clear the difficulty of minority writers, who are expected to represent, through their writing, their ethnic community and serve as the witness of their experiences and memories. On the other hand, the father’s refusal to let his memories be neatly categorized and packaged reveals the impossibility of literature to fully capture the living experiences of war and displacement.

Among the writers discussed in this chapter, Nam Le is the only writer whose book has been translated and published by a renowned publisher in Viet Nam. His success abroad helped him gain attention in Viet Nam, where critics praised his ability to surpass the expectation of an ethnic writer to write about his or her community and immerse himself into the life of others. Yet, a Vietnamese critic like Nguyen Thanh Son also criticizes the shortcoming of his last story, “The Boat,” calling it a repayment to the community and claiming that Nam Le, like other 1.5- and second-generation Vietnamese writers in the diaspora, fails to reflect the trauma of the displacement process fully, being too close and yet too far removed from the experiences of the generation of their parents. Yet, the open endings in all of the stories in the book and the impossibility of representation established in the first story suggest that Nam Le did not try to represent the trauma of war and displacement. Instead, the violence and death on the boat, a common experience and indeed a common motif in Vietnamese diasporic literature, is only one layer of the experience of the Vietnamese in the story, in the same way that the violence in Tehran and Cartagena only represent one aspect of the life of the non-Vietnamese characters. In refusing to represent the memories of the community, Nam Le suggests that the war and the violence that follows it cannot be the only framework to understand the life and death of the Vietnamese diaspora.

Conclusion

As we read these texts, we wish to echo Edward Said’s warning that “to think of the exile informing this literature as beneficially humanistic is to banalize its mutilations, the losses it inflicts on those who suffer them, the mutedness with which it responds to any attempt to understand it as ‘good for us.’”¹⁵ Focusing on the work of five writers of the Vietnamese diaspora, this chapter seeks to explore the diversity and multiplicity in the way Vietnamese diasporic writers of the 1.5 and second generation approach storytelling and the aftermath of the American War in Viet Nam. Looking at the impact of the war through the framework of trauma, our analysis highlights the recurring themes of rootlessness, alienation, and violence that continue to shape not only the life

of Vietnamese in the diaspora, but also the forms of culture produced by this generation of writers. Moving beyond the refugee narrative and the American War in Viet Nam as the framework of analysis, this body of literature helps us understand the way that war and violence have an impact on cultural forms. At the same time, they challenge the way that war and displacement have been used to create an overarching narrative about Vietnamese diasporic literature and culture. For each of the writers explored in this chapter, the war is an important aspect of their work. Yet, it is not the only determining factor that shapes the experience of the narrators and characters. Instead, these authors connect the trauma of the American War in Viet Nam with the impact of other kinds of violence and social structures, in the diaspora and different geographical and historical contexts, which equally shape the form and content of their works. In so doing, they make clear how the war can only be understood within a diasporic and transnational context while forcing readers to reckon with the contradiction and complexity of using war as a framework of analysis of a body of literature that seeks to complicate the memories of its foundational violence.

Notes

- 1 John Carlos Rowe, "Bringing It All Rack Home": American Recyclings of the Vietnam War," in *The Violence of Representation*, ed. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse (London: Routledge, 1989), 197.
- 2 Scholars such as Thu Huong Nguyen Vo, Yen Le Espiritu, and Mimi Thi Nguyen argued, for instance, that the images generated about the war have been shaped by a national belief in U.S. exceptionalism, a rhetoric that depicts the United States as a fighter of the free world and Viet Nam as an Other to be either rescued or destroyed. Also see le thi diem thuy's poem "shrapnel shards on blue water."
- 3 See Christina Schwenkel, *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam: Transnational Remembrance and Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); and Viet Thanh Nguyen, "Just Memory: War and the Ethics of Remembrance," *American Literary History* 25.1 (2013): 144–63.
- 4 See Isabelle Pelaud, *This Is All I Choose to Tell: History and Hybridity in Vietnamese American Literature* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011).
- 5 Although we focus in this chapter on writers who have emerged from refugee communities, we do not claim that they are the only, or even the most important writers of the Vietnamese diaspora. The Vietnamese diaspora was formed by multiple transnational historical events, which have produced diasporic communities in different parts of the world. In this paper we have not discussed the works of French Vietnamese authors, whose dispersal was the result of the French colonialism. (We only discussed the works by Linda Lê who left because of the outcome of the American War in Viet Nam.) We have also not focused on diasporic Vietnamese writers in Eastern Europe, whose displacement was caused by that war as much as by

the cooperation within the communist bloc. This strategic choice results primarily from the desire to challenge the way that the war has been used as the only framework to discuss Vietnamese diasporic literature. However, we recognize that such a choice also replicates the power dynamic within the Vietnamese diaspora, which often result in the privileging of the memories of refugee communities in North America and Western Europe.

- 6 Numbering at more than 1.5 million, the Vietnamese American immigration represented the largest population movement to America since World War II. The largest Vietnamese enclaves in Orange County, San Jose, Houston, Dallas, and Washington, D.C. changed the demography and landscape of these cities. At the same time more than a million Vietnamese settled down in other countries, such as France (250,000), Australia (160,000), and Canada (152,000). Other countries involved in Viet Nam on the side of the South were South Korea, New Zealand, the Philippines, Thailand, and Taiwan. Countries that fought on the side of the North included China, the Soviet Union, North Korea, and Cuba.
- 7 See Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 222–37. These representations also open what Deleuze and Guattari refer as a "nomadic space," in which subjectivities are blurring the boundaries that maintain a status quo. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). We thank Karl Britto for his thoughtful comments on this chapter.
- 8 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma Narrative and History* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), 91. Further references in parentheses in the text.
- 9 Kim Thuy, *Ru* (Montreal: Libre Expression, 2009), 100. Further references in parentheses in the text.
- 10 See Maya Muir, "Monique Truong Avoids the Sophomore Slump with Her New Novel," *The Oregonian* (September 16, 2010); Joan Frank, "Bitter in the Mouth by Monique Truong," *San Francisco Chronicle* (September 5, 2010); Beatriz Terrazas, "Book review: 'Bitter in the Mouth' by Monique Truong," *Dallas Morning News* (September 5, 2010).
- 11 Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 7.
- 12 The novels for which Lê received national prizes are *Les Évangiles de Crime* (1992), *Les Trois Parques* (The Three Fates) (1997), *Cronos* (2010), and *À L'Enfant que Je N'Aurai pas* (2011).
- 13 The American War in Viet Nam is described in *Slander* as a war between the occupation army and "skinny, ugly men in black." See Linda Lê, *Slander*, trans. Esther Allen (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 45.
- 14 Linda Lê, *Tu Écriras sur le Bonheur* (Paris: Presses Universitaires, 1999), 330.
- 15 Edward Said, "Reflections on Exile," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 357–8.

Refugee Aesthetics: Cambodia, Laos, and the Hmong

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Published in 2012, Cambodian American author Vaddey Ratner's novel *In the Shadow of the Banyan* details the traumatic experiences of an extended Khmer family (inclusive of grandparents, uncles, and immediate relatives) struggling to survive under the authoritarian Khmer Rouge regime (1975–9). The historical background to the novel is this: on April 17, 1975, the communist Khmer Rouge (also known as “Red Cambodians”) overtook Cambodia’s capital (Phnom Penh); over the course of the next three days, the city’s denizens (like those living in other Cambodian urban centers) were forced to relocate to labor camps in the nation’s countryside. Guided by the superseding desire to eliminate all Western influence and create a classless society, the Khmer Rouge prohibited religion, outlawed currency, proscribed education, and strategically targeted those who were most closely allied with the previous regime or deemed “enemies of the people” due to alleged Western affiliations. On January 7, 1979, the Vietnamese ostensibly liberated Cambodia, signaling the end to both regional hostilities and the dissolution of the Khmer Rouge regime. Setting aside the relatively short time period of Khmer Rouge rule, which lasted three years, eight months, and twenty days, its impact was catastrophic: the majority of Cambodia’s teachers (three-quarters) died or fled the country; 90 percent of Khmer court musicians and dancers were dead; nine judges were left in country; and out of an estimated 550 doctors, only forty-eight survived. In total, between 1975 and 1979, the Khmer Rouge was responsible for the deaths of an estimated 1.7 million Cambodians (21 to 25 percent of the extant population), who perished due to starvation, forced labor, disease, and execution.

Known as the “Killing Fields era” to those outside Cambodia and “Pol Pot time” for in-country Khmers, this violent past serves as the primary setting for *In the Shadow of the Banyan*. As a child survivor of the “Killing Fields,” Ratner (as Cambodian refugee turned Cambodian American writer) is at once intimately connected to the historical, cultural, and political frames at the

forefront of her debut novel. Based on Ratner's own experiences "growing up under the Khmer Rouge," *In the Shadow of the Banyan* was the recipient of much acclaim: in addition to being a *New York Times* Bestseller and *New York Times Book Review* Editor's Choice, the novel was a 2013 Pen/Hemingway Award Finalist, a Book of the Year Indies Choice Award Finalist, and was even featured on *O, The Oprah Magazine* summer reading list. Notwithstanding such mainstream literary success, it is the author's characterization of her award-nominated, prize-winning work that is most relevant to this chapter's multifaceted focus on "refugee aesthetics" in Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong American writing.

In a book trailer that accompanied *in the Shadow of the Banyan*'s publication, Ratner explains:

[The novel] isn't so much the story of the Khmer Rouge experience, of genocide, or even of loss and tragedy. What I wanted to articulate was something more universal, more indicative, I believe, of the human experience – our struggle to hang onto life, our desire to live, even in the most awful circumstances. In telling this story, it isn't my own life I wished others to take note of. I have survived, and the gift of survival, I feel, is honor enough already. My purpose is to honor the lives lost, and I wanted to do so by endeavoring to transform suffering into art.¹

In emphasizing "something more universal" with regard to the human experience, and by stressing the desire to "transform suffering into art," Ratner unintentionally although quite powerfully underscores the refugee-driven tenets of contemporary Southeast Asian American authorship. Predicated on a precariousness epitomized by the "struggle to hang onto life . . . even in the most awful circumstances," Cambodian, Hmong, and Lao American writing lays bare the particular histories that prompt forced migrations from the country of origin (Cambodia and Laos) to the nation of settlement (the United States).

Notwithstanding nationally specific differences with regard to war, in-country conflict, persecution, and mass violence, what thematically connects such Southeast Asian American authorship is, as this chapter maintains, an explicit preoccupation with U.S. foreign policy, an implicit negotiation with the aftermaths of American intervention, and a contemplation of involuntary statelessness. To more fully consider the political stakes of such writing, this chapter begins with a concentrated evaluation of "refugee" as a now developed term within international human rights and U.S. immigration/migration policy. The ways in which refugees are defined and categorized through state instability and individual precariousness foreground the next

two sections of this chapter, which explore what exactly is meant by “refugee aesthetics” and consider the ongoing influence of Holocaust narratives on contemporary Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong American writing. As an oft-deployed human rights referent, the Holocaust resonates as arguably the most well-known genocide, due to international tribunal and the widespread circulation of *Shoah* narratives in literature, film, and television in the post–World War II period.

While the Holocaust remains an overt historical touchstone for Southeast Asian American writing, contemporary Cambodian, Lao, and Hmong American writing is dominated by what is troublingly forgotten vis-à-vis the Vietnam War (1959–75). Correspondingly, this chapter examines the ways in which Southeast Asian American authors employ established templates for detailing state-sanctioned atrocity (primarily the Holocaust) to reveal the expansive contours and impacts of Cold War U.S. foreign policy. In so doing, Cambodian, Lao, and Hmong American authors render visible the cause-and-effect relationship between the Cold War, the Vietnam War, and discernible “refugee-ness.” This transnational reading of refugee subjectivity, which brings together violent history and survivor memory, presages a concluding characterization of “refugee aesthetics” as a Southeast Asian American artistic mode marked by human rights testimonial, commemorative remembrance, and juridical activism.

Defining and Delineating Refugee-ness in the Postwar Era

In the post–World War II era, refugees occupy principal roles in a tragically all-too-familiar before and after narrative of state-authorized persecution and subsequent statelessness. Such Janus-faced experiences, simultaneously rooted in the traumatic past and indicative of the uncertain present, are apparent in the very etymology of the term *refugee*. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word’s fourteenth-century origins and subsequent usages consistently marry threats of persecution to anxious out-of-country movements. Fixed to the French past participle of *réfugier* (“to take refuge”), a refugee is, by obligatory designation and urgent classification, an émigré tasked with the ever-pressing need to find sanctuary. Set against this exilic context, the refugee (as both a distinct subject and an identifiable noun) gained greater visibility and currency in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when French Protestants (Huguenots) fled France to avoid religious persecutions following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes (1685).² The term’s present-day

meaning – as an idiom for “a person who has been forced to leave his or her home and seek refuge elsewhere, esp. in a foreign country, from war, religious persecution, political troubles, the effects of a natural disaster, etc.” – dramatically reflects a twentieth century marked by perpetual war, ceaseless conflict, and cataclysmic genocide.

Fundamental to the lexical definition of a “refugee” is a political negotiation of homelessness that occurs in the midst of crisis. Haunted by the very real potential of permanent nonprotection, a refugee is, according to Giorgio Agamben, a “body without civil rights” circumscribed by a “bare life” precariousness forged during “states of exception” (e.g., civil war, international conflict, and regime shift).³ Such precarity, symptomatic of an unpredictable existence, is synonymous with a nationless condition of profound insecurity. To be sure, this reading of vulnerability inevitably pivots on the problem of state-dictated rights. These protections – codified in governmental constitutions, parliamentary charters, and legislative statutes – necessarily privilege the citizen over the noncitizen. Hence, this precariousness hinges on the perils of disenfranchised noncitizenship (such as legal nonrepresentation) and the hospitable capacity of nation-states willing to provide asylum.

Such multifaceted defenselessness presages the basic tenets contained in 1951 United Nations “Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees” (UNHCR). This first-ever convention explicitly and implicitly stressed universal culpability, global humanitarianism, and international intervention for those forcibly made stateless.⁴ Approved on July 28, 1951, the multilateral UN treaty initially delimited who was and who was not a refugee (e.g., war criminals and political leaders responsible for genocidal regimes). According to the convention’s Article I (A), a refugee is someone who has a

well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership to a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.⁵

As a primary historical context and referent, the original UN definition of *refugee* drew heavily upon lessons learned during World War II and the Holocaust, wherein European Jews faced the “well-founded fear” of involuntary and ultimately disastrous denaturalization. Due to anti-Semitic “reasons of religion,” European Jews became, as Agamben characterizes, *de jure* “bodies without civil rights”; not having a nationality, they encountered forced relocation

(first to impoverished ghettos and then to concentration camps in Poland and Germany). By war's end, two-thirds of the European Jewish population – roughly six million men, women, and children – perished.

Guided by the specter of Nazi Germany's "Final Solution" (1942–5), influenced by prosecutions at Nuremberg (1945–6), affected by the war-driven displacement of millions, and prompted by the ratification of the UN Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the initial legal codification of "refugee" was decidedly limited. In particular, the original definition was applicable only to European subjects whose perilous statelessness occurred *before* January 1, 1951.⁶ Notwithstanding contemporaneous and postconvention debate, the troubling rigidity associated with legitimate "refugee-ness" remained until January 31, 1967, when the United Nations ratified an amended, more inclusive, protocol that eschewed geographic prerequisites and temporal requirements.⁷ Inadvertently though nevertheless meaningfully, the expansion of "refugee" to encompass not only a particular region (e.g., Europe) but also the world would become increasingly relevant to American politicians and U.S. policy makers.

As the Cold War heated up in the Caribbean, Latin America, and Southeast Asia, the term gained further significance when set adjacent to U.S. foreign and domestic policies, which prompted displacements abroad (through overt war making and covert campaigns) and engendered resettlements at home (using refugee-oriented legislation and assistance). Consequently, within a Cold War U.S. context, the term *refugee* encapsulates the legacies of the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion in Cuba (1962), militarized incursions into the Dominican Republic (1965–6), and the collateral failures of the Vietnam War (1959–75). This latter conflict, unambiguously responsible for the largest influx of Southeast Asians into the United States, foregrounds this chapter's historicized focus on refugee cultural production, particularly with regard to the relatively recent emergence of Cambodian, Lao, and Hmong American literature. Such literary productions consistently rehearse – by way of plots, characterizations, and motifs – the actuality of war and its variegated aftermaths. In so doing, these narratives on one level cohere with the UNHCR definition of *refugee-ness*, which requires would-be applicants to recount the human rights violations at the forefront of compulsory migration.

On another level, Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong American authors reimagine the tumultuous histories relevant to both the country of origin and the nation of asylum using a conspicuously transnational approach that, undeniably, links U.S. foreign policy to American refugee resettlement. In particular, Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong American authorship focuses on a

two-sidedness wherein what is lost “over there” is recalled alongside assimilative challenges “over here.” These transnational movements assume an aesthetic register with regard to genre. This authorship engages the tactical fusion of legible U.S. literary modes (such as memoir and poetry) to traditional artistic practices (such as oral storytelling). Circumscribed by history, concentrated on memory, and guided by the language of human rights, Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong American authorship is intimately concerned with recuperating the misremembered past as a means of laying bare the expansive contours and enduring legacies of the Vietnam War. It is through such “refugee aesthetics” that these writers recollect the traumatic and still-unreconciled dimensions of the Southeast Asian refugee experience. Last, but certainly not least, it is also through this mode that Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong American authors bring to light the limits of human rights, the boundaries of international humanitarianism, and the forgetfulness of U.S. war making in Southeast Asia.

Southeast Asian American Literature, Holocaust Narratives, and Refugee Aesthetics

While Vietnamese American writing remains the most prominent “displacement literature” within the mainstream U.S. literary marketplace, other Southeast Asian American refugee memoirs and elegies about the war – along with its legacies – have flourished in the last two decades of the twentieth century. To be sure, the majority of non-Vietnamese, book-length works are authored by Cambodian Americans, survivors of the previously mentioned “Killing Fields era.” The currency of such work is in part attributable to the widespread circulation of Sydney Schanberg’s 1980 *New York Times* exposé “The Death and Life of Dith Pran,” the cinematic success of Roland Joffé’s 1984 Academy Award-winning film *The Killing Fields* (a film adaptation of Schanberg’s article), and Dith Pran’s multiple-author collection *Children of the Killing Fields* (1999). These productions acquire further currency when set alongside the more recent deliberations of the UN/Khmer Rouge Tribunal, which was charged with the task of trying the regime’s few remaining leaders for crimes against humanity and crimes of genocide. To clarify, notwithstanding the passage of more than thirty years since the dissolution of the Khmer Rouge regime, to date only three Khmer Rouge officials – Kaing Guek Eav (also known as “Comrade Duch,” head of Tuol Sleng Prison), Khieu Samphan (Khmer Rouge Deputy Prime Minister), and Nuon Chea (“Brother

Number Two,” Khmer Rouge Deputy Secretary) – have been found guilty of war crimes and sentenced to life imprisonment.

Since 1999, Cambodian American authorship has largely taken testimonial form, evident in the works such as Molyda Szymusiak’s (Buth Keo’s) *The Stones Cry Out: A Cambodian Childhood, 1975–1980* (1999), Chanrithy Him’s *When Broken Glass Floats: Growing Up under the Khmer Rouge* (2000), Vatey Seng’s *The Price We Paid: A Life Experience in the Khmer Rouge Regime* (2005), and Ronnie Yimsut’s *Facing the Khmer Rouge: A Cambodian Journey* (2011). Arguably the most prominent Cambodian American memoirist is Loung Ung, whose trilogy of autobiographies – *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers* (2000), *Lucky Child: A Daughter of Cambodia Unites with the Sister She Left Behind* (2010), and *Lulu in the Sky: A Daughter of Cambodia Finds Love, Healing, and Double Happiness* (2012) – recount experiences before, during, and after the Killing Fields era (inclusive of resettlement in the United States). Significantly, Vaddey Ratner’s previously discussed *In the Shadow of the Banyan* (2012) represents the first book-length Cambodian American-authored fictionalized account of the Cambodian genocide.

Shifting to Lao American writing, the majority of works published reflect the experiences of the Hmong, an ethnic minority group. A principal challenge facing Hmong American authorship is the degree to which historical modes of creative expression in the country of origin favored oral stories, oral poetry, and textile art (as emblemized by folkloric story cloths). Such contexts to varying degrees anticipate an emphasis on poetry, as a blended oral and written form which accesses structures and rhythms from Hmong folklore, textile art, and music. The paucity of Lao American authorship is apparent in the mistaken notion that Anne Fadiman’s nonfiction account of a Hmong family in *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* is a Hmong American text. Nevertheless, the developing vitality of the Hmong American Writer’s Circle (inaugurated in 2004 and based out of Minneapolis, Minnesota), along with the publication of various anthologies, attests to the growth of Laotian American literature. Recent publications include the mixed genre anthology *Bamboo among the Oaks: Contemporary Writing by Hmong Americans* (2002), Pas Moua’s poetry collection *Where the Torches Are Burning* (2002), and Kao Kalia Yang’s *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir* (2008). Yang’s work is particularly noteworthy insofar as it is one of the few published memoirs about the Hmong American experience. As the next section underscores, the memoir’s narrative arc – which involves the Vietnam War, authoritarian regime shift, and refugee displacement – directly resonates with the testimonial dimensions of Cambodian American authorship.

With regard to non-Hmong Lao American cultural production, Bryan Thao Worra remains the subfield's most well-known poet, whose work includes an e-chapbook titled *Touching Detonations* (2003) and the poetry collection *The Tuk-Tuk Diaries: My Dinner with Cluster Bombs* (2003). Worra's *Touching Detonations* and *The Tuk-Tuk Diaries* emerge from the poet's own biography: Worra was born in Laos and adopted by a U.S. serviceman at age three. This personal history is mediated in both *Touching Detonations* and *The Tuk-Tuk Diaries*. Specifically, *Touching Detonations* and *The Tuk-Tuk Diaries* reimagine the poet's return to his former homeland after a thirty-year absence. Thematically at stake in each work is a negotiation with the ongoing legacies of the Vietnam War, which includes mentions of unexploded ordnance as the direct consequence of the so-termed Dirty War period, wherein the United States covertly intervened in the Laotian Civil War. Alternatively, Worra's *On the Other Side of the Eye* (2007), *BARROW* (2009), and *DEMONSTRA* (2013) are much more speculative in their respective poetic engagements with science fiction and fantasy. Lastly, Worra's *Water Ink* (2008) uses traditional writing technologies (such as the recipe for Chinese ink and indigo drawings) and illustrations in order to bring together Asian and Western aesthetics. While Worra's oeuvre is quite diverse with regard to genre and themes, what remains constant is the author's consistently *transnational* consideration of history, memory, movement, and poetics.

Acknowledging the qualified diversity of Cambodian, Lao, and Hmong American literary production (through focus, circulation, and reception), the most frequent genre directly employed or indirectly accessed is the elegy (through poetics) and the bildungsroman (with regard to prose), wherein refugee writers recount their experiences and memories "coming-of-age" during the post-Vietnam War era. Such "coming-of-age" frames underscore the authorial preponderance of 1.5-generation Cambodian, Lao, and Hmong Americans (those individuals who were born in Cambodia, Laos, or Southeast Asian refugee camps but who were raised in the United States). With decidedly overt human rights orientations, rendered apparent in productions that time and again settle on histories of state-authorized mass violence and the experiences of subjects-made-refugees, the prevalence of the elegy as mournful analogue and the bildungsroman as a primary witness genre makes "sense" given each mode's capacity to narrate loss. Even so, the forms these productions take – whereby primary plots and characterizations inevitably reinforce war crime abuses while remembering genocidal politics – incontrovertibly access a direct link to previously published and widely circulated Holocaust testimonials. To that end, the literary treatment of the Holocaust provides

a productive frame for examining Cambodian, Lao, and Hmong American narratives about state-authorized mass violence and dislocation because of similarities of form and content (as testimonial literatures, refugee accounts, and histories of genocide).

The Holocaust, Refugee Memoirs, and Human Rights Narratives

Epitomized by works such as Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* and Elie Wiesel's *Night* trilogy, such a mode – overwhelmingly recognizable within a post-Nuremberg schema and post-1948 human rights regime – repeatedly rehearses a tripartite narrative comprised of clearly delineated perpetrators (Nazi officials), victims (European Jews), and bystanders (non-Jewish Europeans). Since World War II, texts written by Jewish survivors about their respective experiences during the Holocaust have an established position vis-à-vis the U.S. literary marketplace, leading to at least a familiarity of a sub-genre unfailingly marked by eyewitness accounts about and representations of large-scale atrocities. Often couched in “unspeakable” terms, the experiences of these survivors have been documented photographically; they have been memorialized (as indicated in the preceding text) in autobiographies; the Holocaust as a recognizable genocide event has likewise been screened in cinematic productions such as *Schindler's List* (1993), *The Pianist* (2002), and *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (2008). Such influences are implicitly evident in Cambodian, Hmong, and Lao American writing with regard to subject (e.g., state-authorized violence). They are more immediately apparent in Vaddey Ratner's authorial contention that, within the narrative space of *In the Shadow of the Banyan*, “I didn't want them [lost family members] to be forgotten, and while as Elie Wiesel has said, one cannot truly speak for the dead, I wished still to re-invoke the words and thoughts they'd shared with me” (quoted in Hong, “To transform suffering into art,” see note 1).

As established literary antecedents for Cambodian, Hmong, and Lao American accounts of state-authorized mass loss, Holocaust autobiographies involve a related but by no means singular consideration of the bildungsroman as dominant mode. Even though memoirs about the *Shoah* within the popular imagination most immediately connect the bildungsroman to state-sanctioned violence, the genre has, as Joseph Slaughter reminds, a long-standing connection to human rights. According to Slaughter, “since the Atlantic movement of the abolition of the slave trade” the form has been “one of the primary carriers of human rights culture” that has “travel[ed]

with missionaries, merchants, militaries, colonial administrators and technical advisors.”⁸ Within the American literary canon, the nineteenth-century slave narrative – wherein white abolitionists authenticated the veracity of African American accounts concerning the “peculiar institution” – immediately intersects with Slaughter’s characterization. In a more current vein, these works have gained more visibility within a U.S. literary imaginary increasingly flooded by what Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith characterize as stories of “traumatic remembering” symptomatic of a late-century human rights “memoir boom.”⁹

As Slaughter suggests, the use of the bildungsroman as a “primary carrier of human rights culture” is not singularly bound to the Holocaust. Neither is this human rights narrative strategy limited to Cambodian, Lao, and Hmong American authorship within the contemporary American literary imagination. Nor is an overriding concern with social justice and civil rights unique to Southeast Asian American literary studies, given cultural critic Lisa Lowe’s pertinent claim that Asian American cultural production – as “Asian Americanist critique” – is persistently concerned with a “tireless reckoning” of past discriminations, abuses, and exclusions.¹⁰ Even within the narrowed context of Southeast Asian American literature, these human rights forms and modes (wherein the American War in Vietnam figures prominently as violent event and disastrous catalyst) remain, on the one hand, unexceptional. To that end, Vietnamese American works such as Le Ly Hayslip’s 1989 memoir *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (written with Jay Wurtz) analogously deploy the authors’ coming-of-age experiences to expose wartime trials and human rights tribulations.

On the other hand, when set against a larger historical imaginary marked not so much by constant remembrance but rather problematic forgetting, Cambodian, Lao, and Hmong American coming-of-age narratives about war, mass violence, and justice represent memory projects that meaningfully differ from their Vietnamese American counterparts. Central to other Southeast Asian American literatures is a retelling of war that potently militates against the amnesias associated with international and regional impacts. Invested in recuperating this history to memorialize multiple sites of and layered experiences with loss, Cambodian, Lao, and Hmong American writing carries an intervening impulse to recollect a lost prerefugee selfhood. Such reclaimed selfhoods – made legible when juxtaposed with the “collateral” nature of the American War in Vietnam – render visible an unreconciled imaginary punctuated by unresolved human rights violations and still-vexed refugee displacements.

Historical Legacies: The American Wars in Southeast Asia

To comprehend the emergence and contextualize the scope of contemporary Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong American writing one should, when faced with such war-driven frames, recall not only the politics that, as Christopher Hedges reminds us, brought such subjects into “being.”¹¹ Instead, one must, as Lisa Yoneyama avers, concomitantly “remember the forgetting” embedded in complex narratives concerning large-scale militarized conflict, which insist on binaries such as “us versus them” and engender distinctions between those who enjoy “the spoils of war” and those individuals distressingly “spoiled by war.”¹² Simultaneously, to understand the political, cultural, and social stakes that comprise “alternative” sites of Southeast Asian American authorship (e.g., non-Vietnamese American), it is necessary to also expand Lisa Lowe’s previously mentioned characterization of a recognizable “Asian American critique.” Such an analysis productively “begins in the moment of negation that is the refusal to be the ‘margin’ that speaks itself in the dominant forms of political, historical, or literary representation” (Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 28). Whereas the Vietnam War’s prominence as a highly “memorialized event” is readily revealed through frequent antiwar protests, a dizzying visual archive, and numerous veteran testimonials, what is forgotten is the extent to which the conflict (as multiregional enterprise) impacted millions of civilians in Southeast Asia. Last, but certainly not least, if integral to Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong American writing is what Lowe later terms an applicable “tireless reckoning” with the past, then the recollection of that very negation potentially “refuses” amnesias with regard to U.S. foreign policy and Cold War *realpolitik*.

Such *realpolitik* is apparent in the conflict’s geopolitical coordinates, which encompassed not only headquarters in South Vietnam but also Thai/U.S. air bases, naval way stations in the Philippines Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) outposts in Laos, clandestine Cambodian bivouacs, Pacific Island refueling sites (e.g., in Hawai’i and Guam), and East Asian garrisons in Japan and South Korea. It was from these less remembered sites that illegal U.S. bombing campaigns in Cambodia were, despite the nation’s declared neutrality, waged (1965–73). It was also from such places that the CIA planned, coordinated, and executed the “secret war in Laos” or “Dirty War in Laos” (1953–75): General Vang Pao, under the aegis of the CIA, recruited and trained the indigenous Hmong population to combat the North Vietnamese Army and the communist Pathet Lao. This particular Cold War history is accessed in Kao Kalia

Yang's *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir* (2008); as Yang explicates, "When Americans left Laos in 1975, they took the most influential, the biggest believers and fighters for democracy with them, and they left my family with thousands of others behind to wait for a fight that would end for so many in death."¹³ Taken together, such military installations and militarized campaigns confirm the extent to which the Vietnam War was an incontrovertibly *uncontained* Cold War conflict.

As significant, if the war was geopolitically uncontained, it was likewise demographically unrestrained. Among the bodies that were employed, relocated, and displaced, an estimated 2.15 million American servicemen were deployed. Of that number, 1.6 million saw active combat. A total of 58,260 Americans were killed in battle. Another 1,724 Americans were reported missing in action.¹⁴ Southeast Asian "casualties of war" are far less precise, though the Vietnamese government reported in 1995 that 1.1 million died during the conflict. Almost three million perished in Laos and Cambodia.¹⁵ In the days before and the months following the so-termed Fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, which marked the "official" military end of U.S. involvement in the region, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand struggled – albeit to different degrees – with the postconflict costs of U.S. intervention. Former allies in Vietnam (expressly the South Vietnamese) and Laos (specifically the Hmong) witnessed their fortunes change seemingly overnight with newly installed communist governments that were, not surprisingly, unsympathetic and even hostile due to *a priori* American affiliations. Given the relative newness of Vietnamese and Laotian governments that labored without benefit of international aid and UN support to develop viable "peacetime" infrastructures, in-country instability was predictably common and contributed to a consistent exodus of Southeast Asians out of country and out of region.

Cambodians, as the opening of this chapter underscores, endured a disastrously different postwar fate under the authoritarian Khmer Rouge ("Red Cambodians"). As a catalyst, U.S. bombings of the Cambodian countryside – along with the installation of the vehemently anti-communist General Lon Nol as head of state – would precipitate in-country political instability and war-driven fatigue that enabled the rise of the Khmer Rouge, who promised piece and national security. This causal reading of the so-termed Killing Fields era, which commences with U.S. foreign policy and ends in Khmer Rouge authoritarianism, is reflected in the majority of Cambodian American writings about "Pol Pot Time." For example, in *First They Killed My Father*, Ung includes a short exchange that implies U.S. culpability. In a chapter titled, "April 1975," Ung (as both writer and protagonist) asks her

father about “the bombs dropping in the countryside.”¹⁶ Summarizing her father’s response, Ung writes:

He told me that Cambodia is fighting a civil war, and that most Cambodians do not live in cities but in rural villages, farming their small plot of land. ... The bombs kill farming families, destroy their land, and drive them out of their homes. Now homeless and hungry, these people come to the city [Phnom Penh] and take it out on all officers in government.¹⁷

While this passage makes no direct mention to the United States, the allusion to bombs, coupled with the anger directed at “all officers in government,” reconfirms the historical fact of U.S. military intervention in the region. Whereas this initial mention indirectly accesses U.S. involvement, Ung subsequently clarifies the political situation that presaged the rise of the Khmer Rouge; as she notes:

The war in Vietnam spread to Cambodia when the United States bombed Cambodia’s borders to try to destroy the North Vietnamese bases. The bombings destroyed many villages and killed many people allowing the Khmer Rouge to gain support from the peasants and farmers. In 1970, Prince Sihanouk was overthrown by his top general, Lon Nol. The United States-backed Lon Nol government was corrupt and weak and was easily defeated by the Khmer Rouge. (*First They Killed My Father*, 40)

Tellingly, this admission of U.S. culpability occurs after the Khmer Rouge takeover of Phnom Penh. Though seemingly incidental, the evaluation of U.S. foreign policy embedded in Ung’s recollection renders explicit a critique of Cold War politics.

In the war’s numerous aftermaths, nearly three million Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians sought asylum in Europe, Australia, and the United States. Due to regional proximity, Thailand became a significant way station for Cambodians; for example, approximately 510,000 Cambodians fled to the close-by Southeast Asian nation. In March 1980, Thailand’s Khao-I-Dang Holding Center in Prachinburi Province served as temporary home to 160,000 refugees. In response to the abandonment of former allies and in the face of an ever-growing refugee crisis, the U.S. Congress passed the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act on May 23, 1975, facilitating the legal entrance of evacuees (primarily from Vietnam). In 1980, Congress passed a more comprehensive refugee act, one that cohered with the 1967 UN protocol and included so-called Vietnamese boat people, Cambodian genocide survivors, Laotian civilians, and Hmong refugees. These refugee acts – forged in the aftermath of war and intended to ameliorate ever-growing humanitarian calamities – paved

the way for the aforementioned *en masse* influx of individuals from the region to the United States.

Toward a Refugee Aesthetics

The terms through which Southeast Asian refugees were “made” – and the routes through which they traveled from war-torn nation to refugee camp, from refugee camp to the United States – predictably occupy a central narrative axis in Southeast Asian American writing. Yet, the various military histories responsible for producing such subjects – which involve covert operations, secret campaigns, civil wars, and “dirty wars” – effectively contradistinguish divergent modes of Southeast Asian American authorship. As point of difference, while Vietnamese American writing understandably privileges the American War in Vietnam as a prevailing conflict narrative, Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong American literature is charged with the task of mapping the “before, during, and after” impacts of not only U.S. foreign policy but specific in-country politics and policies. In contrast to Vietnamese American writings about the catastrophic practices and ruinous impacts of U.S. foreign policy, Cambodian, Lao, and Hmong American literary productions access the Vietnam War as a necessary, but not *exclusive*, context for the refugee experience. Such works repeatedly abjure statelessness in favor of prewar selfhood. These productions focus on the violations concomitant with regime shift. Last, but certainly not least, they simultaneously concentrate on the difficulties of postconflict belonging.

The literary emphasis on collateral damages and the cultural restaging of “before, during, and after” modalities are evident in Kao Kalia Yang’s previously mentioned *The Latehomecomer*, which opens within the confines of Thailand’s Ban Vinai Refugee Camp. Noting that she “lived in a place that felt like it had an invisible fence made of men with guns who spoke Thai and dressed in the colors of old, rotting leaves,” Yang learns that “*Hmong* meant *contained*” (1). Soon after this revelation, Yang critiques the U.S. presence in Laos, noting that “The Americans entered the country and recruited Hmong to serve, first as guides, then later as fighters, without thought to the price their recruits would pay with their lives and the lives of their children for generations to come” (*The Latehomecomer*, 12). In stressing that “Hmong” meant “*contained*,” Yang brings into focus not only a presentist condition in the refugee camp. In so doing, she highlights the disastrous politics of Southeast Asian containment that, as the subsequent observation makes clear, were profoundly shortsighted and uninterested in the “price” paid by “generations

to come.” As the remainder of Yang’s memoir details, such costs involved wartime casualties, multiple displacements, and – notwithstanding eventual asylum in the United States – assimilative trials and tribulations. The nostalgia connected with preconflict selfhood is manifest in a closing observation regarding Yang’s grandmother’s passing, the “first natural death in our family since 1975,” which affords a memorial possibility of taking the family “back to before the war, before the refugee camps of Thailand, before the life in America – all the way to the clouds again” (231).

To an extent emblematic of Cambodian, Lao, and Hmong American cultural production, Yang’s meditation on refugee life is epitomized by a desire to go “to the clouds,” and gestures toward a profound desire to return to a time, place, and nation that no longer exist due to the fact of war and the very idea of rupture. Indeed, the memoir is haunted by the omnipresent specter of human rights violation and affiliated notions concerning asylum, which repeatedly return to the lack of a designated “home space” as indicated by constant in-country movements. Inhabiting a war-torn landscape, Yang observes that “the sound of rain mingled with the sound of explosives” (21). This uncanny juxtaposition – between nature and militarization – is reiterated in Cambodian American writer Chanrithy Him’s *When Broken Glass Floats*, which engenders a direct connection to the Cambodian genocide with the elegiac declaration that “mass graves in the once-gentle land, / Their blood seeps into mother earth” (epigraph in front matter). Whereas Yang and Him strategically use the landscape to highlight various histories of collateral damage, Laotian American poet Worra turns to the familial in “Aftermaths,” wherein the speaker admits his incapacity to “dream of my father, his face blown off by an / Anonymous enemy rifle before the picture could be taken.” Even in the absence of dreaming, and without benefit of photograph record, Worra’s mournful admission serves a memorial function insofar as he recalls not only his father but also what has happened to his father.

Set against this context of troubled yet evocative remembrance, Cambodian, Hmong, and Lao American writing collectively employs narratives that become legible as international human rights projects; such initiatives reclaim the past while serving as de facto literary memorials. If, as *Shoah* scholar James Young claims, the efficacy of memorials (particularly Holocaust memorials) is their ability not only to commemorate the dead but also to engender debates about the politics that make such remembrances necessary, then Southeast Asian American “memory work” – particularly with regard to Cambodian, Hmong, and Laotian American cultural production – labors to collectively recall the past within the context of an unreconciled present. Indeed, without

benefit of tribunal or international law, and sans the immediate legibility of Vietnamese Americans as collateral damaged subjects of U.S. imperialism, Cambodian Americans, Lao Americans, and Hmong Americans are on one level faced with the daunting task of restaging the oft-disremembered conditions responsible for their position as refugees in the United States.

On another level, such testimonial forms, which reiterate and restage the ways in which individuals become *de facto* “bodies without rights,” cohere with the requirements for nation-based asylum, particularly in the United States. Within an internationalized space of *de jure* “refugee-ness,” wherein one must prove not only one’s victimhood but also one’s precarious personhood, at stake in these works is the constant articulation of state-authorized trauma and authoritarian violence. Accordingly, such reflections in the end employ a distinct set of refugee aesthetics marked by a war-driven sublimity (redolent of aforementioned “terror” frames) that reveals the excesses of militarized brutality, human rights violation, and the legacy of nonhumanitarian intervention. These aesthetic modes – fixed to two-sided ideas of homeland – consistently employ forms familiar to the country of asylum (the United States) as a means of narrating remembrances of the nation of origin (Cambodia and Laos). The multidirectional “sorrows of war” experience by millions of Southeast Asian refugees, who were not only products of Cold War policies but also frontline witnesses to ongoing civil war and in-country deterioration, substantiate a critical reading of Cambodian, Laotian, Hmong American writing through an identifiable *refugee aesthetics*.

Notes

- 1 Quoted in Terry Hong, “‘To transform suffering into art’: Vaddey Ratner’s *In the Shadow of the Banyan*.” Online resource: <http://bloom-site.com/2014/03/03/to-transform-suffering-into-art-vaddey-ratners-in-the-shadow> (accessed June 12, 2014).
- 2 The edict had previously protected the civil rights of Protestants in France.
- 3 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998). Integral to Agamben’s observations of “bare life” is the concentration camp, wherein bodies are deemed disposable during martial law and within other sovereign “states of exception.”
- 4 The same year the United Nations adopted the convention, African American activists put forth a petition charging the United States with genocide; although internationally provocative, the “We Charge Genocide” resolution received little publicity domestically.
- 5 See United Nations, *Treaty Series*, 189: 137.
- 6 The actual convention did not go into force until 1954.
- 7 United Nations, *Treaty Series*, 606: 267.
- 8 See Joseph R. Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 6.

- 9 See Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith, "Conjunctions: Life Narratives in the Field of Human Rights," *Biography* 27.1 (Winter 2004): 1–24.
- 10 See Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).
- 11 According to Christopher Hedges, over the course of the twentieth century, an estimated sixty-two million civilians and forty-three million military personnel have perished in state-authorized, military conflicts. Christopher Hedges, *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* (New York: Public Affairs, 2002), 13.
- 12 Lisa Yoneyama, *Hiroshima Traces: Time, Space, and the Dialectics of Memory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
- 13 Kao Kalia Yang, *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir* (Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press, 2008), 3.
- 14 See Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars: 1945–1990* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Loung Ung, *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 11.
- 17 Ibid.

PART VI



TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY:
9/11, EMPIRE, AND OTHER
CHALLENGES TO LITERATURE

The 9/11 of Our Imaginations: Islam, the Figure of the Muslim, and the Failed Liberalism of the Racial Present

JUNAID RANA

Making a Literature of the Post-9/11 Racial Present

In what might be called post-9/11 literature, the early formation of this genre addresses multicultural, multiracial, and even ethnic concerns, in which the writing is steeped in a racial liberalism that practically wonders aloud at the impact of the security, surveillance, and police state on social life. In what Jodi Melamed astutely periodizes as a neoliberal multiculturalism,¹ racism is for the most part not identified in this literature as a central aspect of coming to terms with the post-9/11 state of affairs, but instead is overlapped with the earlier ideological approaches of racial liberalism that emerged in the postwar era. Under racial liberalism, the dominance of capitalist distribution predicated a particular social order as normative. While the idea of a free market was naturalized as inherently connected to democratic politics and freedom, the notion of a colonial and racial war became a permanent strategic fixture that went unobserved but was structurally foundational.² With this premise at hand, race as a construct of the framework of racial liberalism appears as a narrow analytic that finds its productive strength in an oppositional politics of social justice concerns instead of permeating a wide range of social structures and aspects of quotidian life. Prior to this moment, race was a central concept of the American form of modernity and capitalism; during the Cold War the concept of race disappeared from public discourse while racism persisted as an ongoing issue that surfaced in the civil rights movement.

Similarly, the narrowness of the post-9/11 novel is a product of a political economy that did not deem the alternatives of a radical critique possible. Instead, moral parables and a liberal pragmatics became the modes of explanation that are mostly based on a neoliberal multiculturalism framework. Over and over again in this genre, the trope of a mistaken terrorist is cast as an unassuming Muslim, or even more likely a nonpracticing one, in which the

assumption of misidentification is amplified with a vague notion of secular cosmopolitanism. Islam is then perceived in this simplistic representational construction as the problem of working out the false premises of the so-called clash between Muslims and the West. To resituate the ubiquitous question of the post-9/11 era of “why do they hate us,” we have to understand “why do you hate them,” and, perhaps more precisely, “how do you hate them.” Largely through the rhetoric of racialization, Islam and Muslims were placed within the language of multiculturalism in post-9/11 novels that mimicked the racial surveillance of the U.S. state.

This institutionalization of diversity through post-9/11 literature follows a move away from a centering of racial terms toward what Min Hyoung Song has called a *planetary becoming*.³ In other words, terms such as *Arab American*, *Asian American*, and even *Muslim* become inadequate to describe the complex experience of racial narration beyond the nation-state, in what can only be called global. Yet, race and racism persist as an analytic and lived experience. The question remains for whom, particularly when it is the whiteness of racism that is being contested while also reified as a hegemon in the War on Terror world. My claim that post-9/11 literature fails to take on racism is not just an issue of representation and offensive stereotypes, but also what is more troubling in the acceptance of racial liberalism as the terms of a civil rights struggle that seeks inclusion based on the derivative framework of neoliberal multiculturalism. Racism is not merely epiphenomenal; rather, it is a system of dominance, management, and governance inherent in the histories of European enlightenment, modernity, colonialism, capitalism, and the ongoing workings of white supremacy.⁴

Calling the post-9/11 literature a genre consistent in terms of style, themes, and form is not as insightful as thinking of this fiction as concerned with the implications of a historical event. Industry concerns of making genres for consumption, though, do explain certain tendencies in this literature as attempts by publishers to overlap a number of markets to lure a larger readership. In certain respects the debate over genre is moot, given that the placement of authors within a marketing logic often dictates how a book will be distributed and received by certain audiences. Many of these writers dabble in some of form of experimenting with U.S.-based conceptions of world and ethnic literature. Perhaps one of the most successful writers to do so is Mohsin Hamid. His first novel *Moth Smoke* published in 2000 was certainly pre-9/11,⁵ but its readership expanded dramatically after 2001. While the novel brilliantly renders a complex Pakistan of two classes ingeniously determined by air-conditioning, the plot follows the downward spiral of a bank worker that

unfolds to reveal lost love and missed opportunities. As a counter to assumptions of Islam and Muslims, the novel nicely captures all that is raunchy and unruly in various strata of Pakistani society seen through the eyes of class privilege. This smart book plays with modernist conventions of storytelling, form, and even pokes fun at the *possibility* of modernity for countries such as Pakistan given the contradictions and assumptions of an Orientalism that would deem it forever backward.

In his second novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*,⁶ Hamid continues to extend this exploration of class, belonging, and the tidal shifts of history by employing a dramatic monologue to tell the story of Changez, a rising financial analyst based in New York, who after 9/11 faces unexpected shifts in fortunes, resulting in a return to his country of origin, Pakistan. These themes of unraveling are present throughout Hamid's writings and are a device to see the contradictions of the world anew from the perspective of those not rising in the world of accumulation but who are easily disposable. What *Reluctant Fundamentalist* captures as a device to describe the 9/11 moment is the idea of Islam as a looming threat, by narrating the novel from the perspective of the Muslim other. This notion of a potential Islamic menace exposes the limitations of a liberal humanism and the idea of comprehension, recognition, and understanding that forecloses the inclusion of Muslims as "human," and renders Islam and Muslims as a threat within a limited notion of "humanity" based on principles of the liberal Enlightenment.

While the strategy of writing from the perspective of the Muslim other is promising, the resolution in Hamid's novels depends upon an assumption that liberal humanism will correct itself. More troubling and vexing is the work of the white gaze in this literature in terms of audience, market, and the ideological terms of debate. As *Reluctant Fundamentalist* assumes a multicultural audience that might be glossed as "the West," many other novels that explore the theme of 9/11 embrace an educational narrative through an ethnographic mode of description, while perpetuating the readers' inability to recognize racism as a system. Rather than placing racism at the center of a system of social structure and hierarchy, these novels present it as accidental and tangential.

New York: Racial Geography of Terror, Detentions, and Deportations

The template for the great American novel for many of the writers of the post-9/11 era is drawn from a number of sources including most obviously Toni Morrison, J. D. Salinger, Jack Kerouac, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Like Hamid's

novels, H. M. Naqvi's *Home Boy* draws on a number of these authors to unveil his tale of upwardly mobile "metrostanis" that devolves into disappearances and suspicions of terrorist activity.⁷ The narrative of deportations and disappearances, which became a central aspect of the Bush-era domestic War on Terror,⁸ frames how racism is constructed and understood in the violence of state terror and policing. Like many of the main novels that take on the 9/11 theme, New York City is the backdrop to the story. For Naqvi, New York is a playground for his trio of Pakistani characters that exude the charisma of a privileged immigrant middle class. After 9/11, this earthly paradise turns into a maze of xenophobic racism that culminates at the center of this new world in the now infamous Metropolitan Detention Center, where many New York immigrants of Arab and South Asian descent were detained. In Naqvi's novel the material fact of violence is conceptualized as an imperial racism inflicted during incarceration and deportation, and the literal death that potentially comes as a consequence of such torture. In Ruth Wilson Gilmore's evocative notion of racism as premature death,⁹ Naqvi's disappeared characters reveal a parable of literal and metaphoric death. While this narrative ploy in the novel quite brilliantly summarizes the fears and shifts that happened within post-9/11 immigrant neighborhoods throughout the United States, the deployment of this portrayal of middle-class immigrant youth hardly accounts for the range of violence witnessed by working-class immigrants who are often the subjects of such brutality.

In one of the best descriptions of loss, mourning, and adaptation in post-9/11 New York, Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* does not force a narrative that involves the landscape of terror created by a police state, but instead slowly and deliberately builds upon the discovery of the city of New York and its diverse boroughs.¹⁰ Through the underground, yet highly organized, cricket leagues, the main character Hans van den Broek encounters the Caribbean and South Asian immigrant class of New York City. In the growing camaraderie with his fellow sports enthusiasts, Hans, the financial analyst used to the privileges of his salary, comes to know how the other half live. Like Naqvi's *Home Boy* the plot is easily comparable to Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby*, yet what is far more interesting in *Netherland* is the depiction of the ethnic neighborhoods of New York that the main character comes to know through its inhabitants. For example, the East Flatbush neighborhoods of Midwood often called Little Pakistan are described in these terms:

We traveled the length of Coney Island Avenue, that low-slung, scruffily commercial thoroughfare that stands in almost surreal contrast to the tranquil residential blocks it traverses, a shoddily bustling strip of vehicles double-parked

in front of gas stations, synagogues, mosques, beauty salons, bank branches, restaurants, funeral homes, auto-body shops, supermarkets, assorted small businesses proclaiming provenances from Pakistani, Tajikistan, Ethiopia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Armenia, Ghana, the Jewry, Christendom, Islam: it was on Coney Island Avenue, on a subsequent occasion, that Chuck and I came upon a bunch of South African Jews, in full sectarian regalia, watching televised cricket with a couple of Rastafarians in the front office of a Pakistani-run lumberyard.¹¹

While O'Neill's novel takes love and loss as a forward-moving story of grief and discovery, the lesson of diversity does not represent a kind of neoliberal multiculturalism of isolated typologies and subjectivities, but is a complex polycultural space of connection, capacity, and productivity. In other words, this New York that Hans discovers is not just about respect and tolerance, but also is an active process of engagement and potentiality that has no guarantees of solidarity or accord. Nonetheless, as Hans "discovers" New York, the disappearances of the post-9/11 period are the backdrop of the story that emerges as inexplicable and confounding, in which the act of disappearance is personalized in a symbolic interiority of continual loss for the main character.

Amy Waldman's *The Submission* is perhaps one of the most successful and critically acclaimed novels that takes up the issue and themes of 9/11.¹² The central motif of the novel is the question of how Muslims are treated differently in U.S. public culture. This novel builds on the landscape of New York to think of Muslims as proper citizens in an imaginary of ethnic neighborhoods and as full-fledged contributors to the U.S. public. Waldman, in reflecting one of the more provocative points of Anne Norton's recent polemic *The Muslim Question*,¹³ poses that the issue of the Muslim within the U.S. public sphere is also one of whether religion will be allowed to continue in the affairs of state and political life. What this proposition does not question are the assumptions of secular political space and the influences of Judeo-Christian traditions within it. Rather, what emerges in this narrative like so many others is a racial liberalism that understands Islam and Muslims as a civil rights issue of racial inclusion without anticipating an effective transformation of a system that depends on racialization in the first place.

Race and Islam in U.S. Social Life

For the most part, the depiction of Islam and Muslims in American literature has not been kind or accurate in any meaningful way. More often than not Islam is at best described in terms of typologies, and practicing

Muslims are caricatured as conservative automatons without agency or complexity. John Updike's novel *Terrorist* is a paradigmatic example.¹⁴ In Updike's characteristically clear prose, his explanatory character is Ahmad Ashmawy Mulloy, a mixed race Muslim, who in a nod to the simplistic clash-of-civilizations thesis is stereotypically portrayed as threatened by the materialism and hedonism of American culture. In a more recent example, this dyad of Muslims and the West is developed into a triad in Ayad Akthar's *American Dervish*.¹⁵ Through the character Hayat Shah, religious belief is tested by an assimilative narrative of belonging represented in the loaded viewpoints of secular humanism, literalist orthodoxy, and mystical Islam. By relying on the tropes of family and religious belief, these narratives fail to capture the complexity of social life and the fact of racism in favor of a narrative of faith under question and the assimilation to American notions of whiteness. Further, in these suppositions of a triumphant American multiculturalism, the problematic of race is replaced with a thin notion of faith in which racism plays no part. In these ideological ploys, anti-Muslim racism is seen as an impossible contradiction in which religion cannot be racialized. In other words, faith is based on individual choice whereas race is biologically determined. Yet, racism and religion have long been intertwined,¹⁶ and to ignore such a possibility is to indulge in a racial liberalism that does not account for the lived experience of historical social structures in which religion is racialized not only in biological deterministic ways – in other words phenotypic appearance – but also in terms of civilizational narratives of good and bad culture.

Two great exceptions to this sort of problematic rendering include Mohja Kahf's *The Girl with the Tangerine Scarf*¹⁷ and Bushra Rehman's *Corona*.¹⁸ Despite Kahf's title that evokes a marketing strategy for teen and young adult readers, this book is a sensitive and complex story of one woman's coming of age as a Muslim in the Midwest. Paralleling the history of Islam and Muslims in America and presenting the theological debates and institutional debates of Islamic institutions in the United States, Kahf's novel is one of the few examples of a direct description, analysis, and critique of systematic forms of racism. Far from the typical immigrant novels that describe the despair of women, these two novels are crafted in the form of journeys of discovery, self-knowledge, and critical assessment.

A foremost achievement of Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is to provide a complex portrayal of Islam and Muslims that is dynamic and discursive. Centering on the character Khadra Shamys in a small midwestern town outside of Indianapolis, the cast of characters seamlessly recounts

the historical fact of racial difference among Muslims in the United States. Khadra's family hails from Syria and her main interlocutors beginning as a young child are Black Muslims. Khadra's world of midwestern Islam is avowedly polycultural and multiracial representing a range of political and social views, a veritable social experiment that includes internalized pitfalls and deep-seated socioeconomic prejudices. The novel, while being an investigation into religious and social life of Muslims, is an excellent parable of the history of Islam in the United States. Through Khadra's ongoing religious construction using debate and argumentation, her spiritual and social journey is a metaphor of the history of Muslims in the United States. For example, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* fictionally brings to life much of the institutional development of Muslims described in Kambiz Ghanea Basiri's excellent *A History of Islam in America*.¹⁹ Yet, while this parallel history is apparent throughout the novel, Kahf deftly exposes the realities of everyday racism as systemic.

The narrative of racism debuts in the early pages of the novel. In an altercation with the Lott boys who live down the street, Khadra is saved by her brother Eyad and her two best friends:

"Brian Lott, whyn't you go pick on someone your own size?" Eyad yelled at the boy on the dirt bike.

"Fuck you, raghead!" Brian shouted back. "We're gonna get you fuckers!"²⁰

As a neighborhood drama of white flight and the not-in-my-backyard racism of the Midwest, Kahf throws in a reminder of the foundations of this violence in the address of the Shamys: "1492 Tecumseh Drive, Fallen Timbers Townhouse Complex, Indianapolis, Indiana, on the southern city limits where the sprawling city almost met up with the small adjoining town of Simmonsville."²¹ While acknowledging the land of indigenous peoples in a clever notation of the numerical address and the year of contact, Tecumseh also represents a native folk hero who fought against American intrusion into tribal lands and the famous Battle of Fallen Timbers that led to Tecumseh's rebellion. As a foundational violence commemorated in suburban living, these references embody the stakes of Muslim inclusion into a racialized narrative driven by white supremacy, Native genocide, settler colonialism, and the idea of American empire. In the work of literary scholar Jodi Byrd this dynamic of racism to indigeneity reveals how colonization continues to be used to usher projects of U.S. empire.²²

Throughout the novel, Khadra's spiritual journey is marked through her use of the veil. As Steven Salaita argues, the scarf functions as a metonym for

Khadra's journey as a Muslim in terms of religious devotion, and represents the issue of protection and ethical values that go beyond a simple gender analysis toward a complex political subject.²³ The scarf is quite obviously racialized as a symbol that represents a clash of gender normativity and an emergent Muslim resistance to social and political structures. For example, throughout Khadra's formative years in high school, racial harassment and violence in this time period became commonplace particularly as a gendered phenomenon.²⁴ During the Iranian hostage crisis, Khadra is pushed from behind forcing her to drop her copies of books by Malcolm X and Theodor Dreiser. When she turns around, Khadra finds Brent Lott, brother of Bryan Lott, and a potential stand-in for well-known conservative politician Trent Lott, harassing her to "take off your towel first, raghead."²⁵ When Khadra refuses, Brent's friend Curtis Stephensen holds her down as Brent rips the hijab off. This assault uses racialized language and enforces gender normativity in the heteropatriarchal violence of social rape: "the brooch from Aunt Khadija was broken . . . there was a smear of blood on the folds of the scarf where the brooch had poked her."²⁶ For Khadra this act of racialized and gendered force leads to a growing distance from the broader world of midwestern bigots and enforces in her a rebellious anger and resolute defiance.

The guiding symbol of race, gender, and religion that is a subtext throughout the novel is the figure of Zahura, the childhood friend of Khadra who goes missing while driving home from a nearby college. Later found to have been murdered and raped, throughout the novel Zahura represents what Anne Cheng describes as *racial melancholia*.²⁷ For Khadra, this inexplicable event of racial and gendered violence leads to a life of grieving and mourning that defines the search for ethical and political being in an unjust world. Indeed, Islam emerges in Khadra's worldview as a dynamic force to argue for a more progressive world, rather than the idea of Islam as a conservative faith-based belief. While Islam provides a discursive notion of social justice, as a Muslim Khadra is racialized as a subject of abjection in the U.S. social structure. Zahura as a Black Muslim woman is rendered a different kind of threat than Khadra. While both are racialized in the eyes of white supremacy, it is the figure of the Black Muslim that is deemed the demographic and historical threat to racial domination.

Two prominent South Asian American characters appear in the last quarter of the novel. Here Seemi, the Pakistani-born Muslim with progressive politics, is dating Vijay, the Indian American Hindu. While this represents an apparent reference to the shared culture and interfaith possibilities of postpartition South Asia, Seemi is the counterpoint for many of Khadra's closely held

beliefs. In one telling encounter, as Khadra works out why her recent roommate who is Iranian renames herself an odd sounding Americanized name in order to claim whiteness and assimilation, Seemi and Khadra as they discuss this revelation engage in a heated argument over racism:

“Anyway, I don’t believe in race. I don’t believe in origins,” Seemi said flatly. “Origins are myths. And race does not exist.”

“Racism exists,” Khadra objected. “You can’t say racism doesn’t exist.”

“I didn’t say racism doesn’t exist. Of course it exists. Races don’t. I mean, the idea that human beings belong to one discrete racial category or another. Like Semitic, Aryan, Slavic, and so on. We’re all mixed.”

“Okay – but then how can you say ...” by then Khadra had lost any logical thread.²⁸

The fact that “racism exists” is the point of denouement in this exchange. To ignore its existence is to miss how history and social life unfold in complex spaces. For Kahf, that the bold and argumentative Khadra loses a “logical thread” is to point out the paradox of acknowledging racism and the confounding struggle of antiracism entangled in her faith belief. To oppose racism is to undo the concept of race, while it is precisely the race concept from which antiracist struggles are enabled. Yet it is also Seemi’s exhortation against origins that causes Khadra to stumble, because the novel is entirely premised on the notion of meaning making and the importance of an elusive idea of belonging. Ultimately, the valorization of thinking without the concept of race certainly misses the importance of recognizing it as a fundamental aspect of how racism permeates social life, despite how mistaken the concept is itself.

As an interesting supplement to Mohja Kahf’s novel, Bushra Rahman uses the narrative of the Pakistani Muslim woman, who in the case of her novel *Corona*, is from Queens, New York. This lively novel is one of the few that takes a female Muslim lead from a working-class background and locates her in a narrative that is thoroughly empowering rather than one of immigrant despair and conflict. Through contradictory and difficult choices, Rahman’s main character Razia Mirza explores her place in a dominant white culture asking questions of belonging and political autonomy. While Razia is a Muslim, she is not really concerned with religious life as a mode of critical position, opting for a notion of cultural life drawn from Pakistani-ness, and more specifically Punjabi ethnicity, toward a South Asian solidarity that imagines a polycultural sense of belonging and dynamic subjectivity.

For example, using the backdrop of Bhangra as a popular dance form with South Asian American youth,²⁹ Rahman interweaves what DJ Rekha famously created after 9/11 in the club night of “Bhangra against Bush” as a political and social space from which to imagine alternative futures and engage in a critical present. In a rebellious world of cultural producers, Razia seeks out those spaces that are not only familiar but also create new vistas. In a generational encounter with older desi parents, Razia is labeled *besharam*, or without shame, and quips, “is that really such a bad thing?”³⁰ Bushra Rahman’s *Corona* refuses the glamorization present in many novels that represent Muslims in a somewhat overplayed trope of party culture. My contention here is that this representation of the “liberal Muslim” assumes a kind of moderation through excess that falls into the traps of a narrative of integration and consent. Rahman explores this trope in a more complex way as a journey that leads to a political life – something often underestimated in the post-9/11 literature and often depicted primarily through the guise of the state in democratic electoral politics. For Rahman, the club is also a political space – and here she is writing with a familiarity of South Asian political spaces in New York – in which pleasure is not just an end toward inclusion into the American way of life; rather, political spaces of pleasure are where the idea of *life* (rather than *American*) can change. This simple axiom from Rahman’s novel is far more radically critical than much of the post-9/11 literature that is attempting to reproduce the dilemmas and possibilities for an interested readership.

In Bushra Rahman’s *Corona*, Razia seeks to shake up her past to create a new present, while similarly Michael Muhammad Knight’s cult novel *The Taqwacores*³¹ takes the sensibilities of exploring Islamic history and a rebellious narrative of Muslim youth. Offering an insightful view into an imagined community of Muslim punks, who inspired real-life social experiments that mimicked the novel, *The Taqwacores* is premised on a narrative of rebellious experimentation and erudite thinking that is ultimately compromised in failure. For Knight, it is almost as if the act of thought is the rebellion related to punk as an oppositional musical form, and in which Islam emerges as an oppositional religious form. Subsumed under a social system maintained through white supremacy, racism, and systemic inequality, to rebel against social power is not necessarily an engagement with collective liberatory or emancipatory movements centered in social justice. Such representational dilemmas beg whether a radical critique is possible in the post-9/11 novel given the discursive dominance of terms such as *terror*, and the overwhelming acceptance of the racialization of the figure of the Muslim.

Frames of Race War: Post-9/11 Philosophy and Literature

“Why do they hate us?” – is without a doubt the defining question of the post-9/11 era that reflects a broader problem. The schoolyard connotations of this simple yet contradictory sounding question, with its posture of innocence and unassuming authority, is about a framing of war, the public consent to this violence, and a recalibration of the national body. Beneath the surface lie the layers of imperial statecraft and the articulation of new forms of U.S. empire launched by the U.S. global War on Terror. While this “hate,” assumed to come from afar, is managed at a distance, domestically the U.S. public square is kept safe from terror by manipulating the role of proper citizenship in relationship to the state. As wars abroad are maintained through the justification of security, a social order on the domestic front is crafted through a policing apparatus. The notion of a “terrorist threat” is based in an idea of who is at risk and who is to blame, and it raises the question of who benefits from the notion of freedom and democracy while others must endure suffering and dispossession. The idea of a “terrorist” depends on definitions, and, more importantly, on determining who might be a terrorist. Although the notion of a “terrorist” is in the main defined by the state, the social effects of such terms depend on genealogies and histories already present in existing social structures. The concepts “terror,” “terrorist,” and “terrorism” are fraught with meanings associated with Muslims and Islam as racialized figures. While the immediate history is linked to the U.S. racial formation, the effect is one that places the figure of the Muslim in a global racial system.³² In short, the War on Terror becomes a global race war that seeks to destroy completely an enemy deemed less than human, as a system of social hierarchy that justifies death and a politics of violence and genocide.

The organized response of Muslims in the United States has often endorsed the good Muslim/bad Muslim dyad that Mahmood Mamdani has parsed as a device of foreign policy.³³ Naming an external enemy to the U.S. nation as the bad Muslim constructed as foreign and marginal is also the central reasoning of the racialization of Muslims in U.S. popular culture.³⁴ While this literature that I have discussed throughout this essay recognizes this development, it has also sought to distance itself from the idea of a bad Muslim while perpetuating the equally fraught conception of the good Muslim. In this sense the move to isolate the bad Muslim as a terrorist abroad has resituated the good Muslim as a domestic Muslim in the United States that in the language of assimilation is a “moderate.” To speak of self-defense and self-determination in the Muslim

world from the perspective of the U.S. security state is to utter a terrorist discourse instead of an anticolonial or decolonial critique. The good Muslim is crafted in a representational strategy that aspires to whiteness and the possibility of civil rights, and says nothing of international wars and the global distribution of violence organized by the U.S. empire-state.

In the aftermath of 9/11, the impact of this larger question of “hate” reached beyond the parameters of understanding and knowing, creating challenges for philosophers to address anew themes of violence, death, war, and empire. Questions of who gets to live, die, and even grieve surround the assumptions of the word *hate* and even the notion of “us.” In *Precarious Life*³⁵ and *Frames of War*,³⁶ Judith Butler challenges U.S. imperial state policies of perpetual war and the frames of how we value life and death. As an evocative critique of the post-9/11 world and U.S. foreign policy, Butler incisively takes apart the assumptions of this notion of “hate” and the deadly impact of such reasoning. As a philosophical response by the political left that included thinkers such as Slavoj Žižek, Paul Virilio, Susan Buck-Morris, and others, in an impressive panoply of books issued by Verso Press in response to 9/11, this thoughtful engagement had a significant impact on the academic scholarship and the pedagogical approaches to 9/11 by specialists and nonspecialists attuned to the issues of Islam and the Muslim world.

Yet, while these interventions shaped the intellectual discourse and response to the War on Terror, the issue of race and racism is surprisingly under-theorized and often conceptually absent as an analytical framework for many of these thinkers. Not all of the previously mentioned scholars use the term *racism* or even articulate it as a complex concept. When they do, rather than getting into the messiness of theorization, racism is understood as a given. Later in *Frames of War*, racism appears in the context of immigration and an antireligious context, continuing a line of thinking that only presents one aspect of the problem of racism and its theorization. Although the issue of racializing Islam and Muslims is certainly about immigration and the global economy, it is also a far more intensely epistemological and ontological issue that is at the center of the project and legacy of colonialism, capitalism, and the Enlightenment project of liberal modernity. Indeed, I would append Butler’s argument in terms of how the human is conceived of through frames of war to include Foucault’s conception of race war that he articulates in *Society Must Be Defended*.³⁷ In one of the few places Foucault discussed race as a system of power, race war is the conceptual apparatus from which enemies and threats are identified toward genocidal extinction. To be more specific with my claim, and to counter that of Butler and others,

racism is not only about modes of normalizing exclusion through visual registers of essentialization. The use of race as a category is the mode from which those who are made to die are created, and from which colonization and genocide continue as a modern project. That this is a strategy of war, and politics by other means, is not surprising, but it is the genealogy and historical roots of such racial formation that is important. Muslims are racialized in the United States in a relationship to the brutality of slavery, genocide, conquest, and exploitation. In other words, a religious racism emerges from a biological and cultural racism that conceptually derives from roots that always tied religion, race, and culture to systems of power and dispossession. Race war in this sense is what Sunera Thobani has more specifically called “white wars” and the reproduction of Western (read white) supremacy in the context of the global War on Terror.³⁸

Yet while racism and its theoretical inquiry have come to haunt the philosophical debate of 9/11, the problematic that hid the workings of race is simultaneously a part of the production of its inestimable power. In what Butler and many of the other philosophers of 9/11 prescribe, “the way out” of this impasse of reorganized power dangerously hints at the same liberal humanism they critique. Eschewing militant violence in favor of a strategy of nonviolence, in *Precarious Life* Butler makes a move in conversation with the arguments Talal Asad later presents in *On Suicide Bombing*³⁹ that attempt to fathom the depth of human suffering that results from massive state violence. Yet this notion of nonviolence, although a valid one, as a sole strategy reproduces a liberal narrative of the state as having the monopoly over violence, that delegitimizes the use of militant violence by anticolonial and liberatory movements by deeming them passé if not altogether failures of the past. In one of the opening chapters of *Frames of War* the politics of resistance are repositioned in terms of the poetry of captives of the War on Terror at Guantanamo. This turn from nonviolence to the aesthetics of resistance is premised on this limited diagnosis of the range of racism and state violence. Ultimately such pragmatic solutions to the quagmire of “normativity” and the return to the moral such that we might grieve for those who have been decimated is part of this aesthetic turn, a position that depends heavily on notions of a racial liberalism premised in the hope of what Mary Dudziak calls Cold War civil rights.⁴⁰

Indeed, this idea of an aesthetic debate is present in the post-9/11 literary works that attempt to reconcile this historical event. The limits of this approach are a weak theorization of racism and the problematic of Muslim racialization. This approach harkens to the set of philosophical queries that

emerged after 9/11, but it also speaks to the expectations of literary markets and the framing of acceptable genres of consumption. Indeed, a certain kind of ethnic literature emerged from publishers that addressed American concerns of “terror,” while creating the conditions of its own failure to ask broader questions about the system of racism that are not limited to U.S.-based settings and are understood under rubrics of global and transnational concern.

The Racialized Figure of the Muslim as the Absence of the Human

Why is the critique of racism absent in most of the post-9/11 literature? Asked from the perspective of the many novels I have discussed, this inverts the question of the post-9/11 era into a seemingly paradigmatic query of “why do we hate Muslims?” The corollary is what Mohsin Hamid, in an unfortunate turn in an otherwise insightful essay, asks, “Why do they love us?” in referring to the world opinion of the American tradition of equality and the need to hold U.S. governments to these standards.⁴¹ The problem with this idea and practice of equality is that it has always been built on a foundation of racism and violence. To undo it would require a new standard, a new imaginary, altogether.

As I have argued, the ambiguity around critiquing racism as a system of violence stems from a subterfuge of ideological valuation that imagines the racialized Muslim as less than human. Drawing on the work of Frantz Fanon, W. E. B. DuBois, Lewis Gordon, Sylvia Wynter, and others who argue for a meaning of the human outside of the strictures of Enlightenment modernity, such a task requires a reflection of racism as systematic and as a response to this dilemma of an emergent critique of racialized systems of dispossession, human suffering, and political and social violence. In a congruent argument to many of the philosophical debates after 9/11, these thinkers do not just call for the reinvention of what it means to be “human,” but that such tropes are precisely those from which systems of power and inequality are produced. Mohja Kahf and Bushra Rahman, in their contrasting feminist-of-color journeys of social and political positional, recreate the closest thing to a radical critique of racial liberalism and neoliberal multiculturalism by refusing simple binaries and neat didactic lessons. While the literature of 9/11 works out the philosophical interrogations of how value is estimated, these approaches fail to account for the concept of race that is a key component of literary modernism and modernity.

Notes

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- 3 Min Hyoung Song, *The Children of 1965: On Writing, and Not Writing, as an Asian American* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).
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- 5 Mohsin Hamid, *Moth Smoke* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000).
- 6 Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (New York: Harcourt, 2007).
- 7 H. M. Naqvi, *Home Boy* (New York: Shaye Areheart Books, 2009).
- 8 See Sunaina Maira, *Missing: Youth, Citizenship, and Empire after 9/11* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); Junaid Rana, *Terrifying Muslims: Race and Labor in the South Asian Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Irum Shiekh, *Detained without Cause: Muslims' Stories of Detention and Deportation in America after 9/11* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
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- 11 *Ibid.*, 146.
- 12 Amy Waldman, *The Submission* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).
- 13 Anne Norton, *On the Muslim Question* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).
- 14 John Updike, *Terrorist* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006).
- 15 Ayad Akhtar, *American Dervish* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2012).
- 16 Rana, *Terrifying Muslims*.
- 17 Mohja Kahf, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2006).
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- 20 Kahf, *The Girl*, 5.
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- 22 Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).
- 23 Steven Salaita, *Modern Arab American Fiction: A Reader's Guide* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011), 37–8.
- 24 See Muneer I. Ahmad, "Homeland Insecurities: Racial Violence the Day after September 11," *Social Text* 20.3 (2002): 101–15; Muneer I. Ahmad, "A Rage Shared By Law: Post-September 11 Racial Violence as Crimes of Passion," *California Law Review*

- 92.5 (2004): 1259–1330; Louise Cainkar, *Homeland Insecurity: The Arab American and Muslim American Experience after 9/11* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2009).
- 25 Kahf, *The Girl*, 124.
- 26 Ibid., 125.
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Narrating War: Arab and Muslim American Aesthetics

SAMINA NAJMI

The turn into the twenty-first century has seen a small but intense efflorescence of literature by writers who identify as Arab and/or Muslim in America. A catalyst for this literary phenomenon has been 9/11 and the ethos of America's War on Terror, including the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The most visible American literary responses to 9/11, such as the novels of John Updike, Don DeLillo, and Sherman Alexie, arguably reinscribe the Arab/Muslim-as-terrorist figure that has loomed large in the American imaginary since the attacks. The particular contribution of writers of Arab or Muslim background to 9/11 literature is that they intervene in the perpetuation of this motif and mythology. They have been joined in their efforts by non-Muslim South Asian American writers like novelist Chitra Divakaruni and playwright Rajiv Joseph. For the most part, however, the literary silence surrounding the demonization of Arab and Muslim Americans since 9/11 has been loud and startling, even within Asian America.

Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams* (2004) and *One Amazing Thing* (2010), and especially, Joseph's play *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* (2009) share the aesthetic as well as the political vision that I focus on here, but for reasons of space I limit my scope to a small group of writers who identify as Arab or Muslim specifically.¹ While acknowledging that Arab and Muslim writings that engage with September 11 and the global violence of the ensuing decade are diverse in form and content, I argue that these works demonstrate a shared aesthetic that may be identified by its emphasis on smallness and connectivity. Works that best exemplify this layered aesthetic include those by Palestinian American poets Naomi Shihab Nye and Suheir Hammad; Iraqi American artist and memoirist Wafaa Bilal, and Pakistani novelists Mohsin Hamid and H. M. Naqvi. I include U.S.-educated Hamid and Naqvi though they do not carry U.S. passports because they write primarily for an American audience, situate their novels in the United States, and engage with U.S. culture and politics even as they divide their time between this country and

others. To the group of writers discussed here may be added playwrights Ayad Akhtar and Wajahat Ali, memoirist Ali Eteraz, novelists Salman Rushdie and Kamila Shamsie, Saher Alam, and others. This chapter does not presume to be comprehensive; rather, it gestures toward a distinct aesthetic of smallness and connectivity that emerges under the broader rubric of Asian American literature. The works discussed here go beyond reflecting shifts in popular sensibilities to enact authorial interventions in post-9/11 American literature and cultural mythologies.

Aesthetic of Smallness: Challenging Sublime Representations of War

The violence of the September 11 attacks, the backlash against Arab, Muslim, and South Asian Americans, the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Jihadist ideology, and the continued violence and strife in Palestine engage the literary imaginations of the writers discussed here. Their strategy for grappling with developments of this magnitude is to employ a representational approach that I call an *aesthetic of smallness*. Such an aesthetic challenges the ideology of the sublime, upon which media representations of war-as-spectacle depend. Eighteenth-century philosophers Burke and Kant have theorized the aesthetic of the sublime in the context of the relation between a magnificent spectacle – often pertaining to landscape – and its evocation of an awe so immense that it terrorizes. In the Kantian tradition, the subject of the sublime experience transcends the initial terror with an assertion of dominance, of masculinized reason, over the potentially overpowering object. Defined in terms of domination, the transfer of the sublime aesthetic from landscape to war is readily imagined.² Francois Debrix makes this connection in his assertion that “the United States’ politics and aesthetics of violence after 9/11 are grounded in the conceptual and visual experience of the sublime.”³ Here Debrix draws on the implications of the Kantian sublime: the spectacle of war’s devastations triggers shock and awe, but more importantly, because the mechanism of the sublime pushes us past the pain of the visual to a rationalization of the spectacle, it lends itself to appropriation by political agendas. The rationalizing aspect of the sublime, it is worth pointing out, was important to Kant, who approved of war to a qualified extent as an energizing, masculinizing force that helped shape civilizations. In Debrix’s view, the sublime rationalization serves the ideology that “only Americans . . . are equipped to provide hope, morality and humanity to the Middle East (starting with Iraq).” The pain of war’s spectacle is justified and transcended with

a palatable, politically motivated, intellectual closure. Locating the aesthetics of Arab and Muslim American writers within this theoretical context, we see that their emphasis on smallness serves as an oppositional stance to the ideological underpinnings of the military sublime. Where larger-than-life visual and verbal abstractions erase particularities and rush us toward rationalizing closure, an aesthetic of smallness subverts the process by focusing our gaze on the individual and the personal. Because such a focus engenders empathy, the aesthetics of smallness and connectivity interlock. In fact, the intersecting aesthetics of smallness and connectivity suggest a countersublime of benevolence.

Naomi Shihab Nye's focus on the small, the concrete, and the everyday has been a hallmark of her poetry for the past thirty years. But after 9/11 and the U.S. invasion of Iraq, her emphasis on the small has acquired a political and ethical urgency. We see this most clearly in her 2005 volume of poems, *You & Yours*, where her aesthetic of smallness operates on two levels: image and language. In the face of spectacular, but ultimately numbing, media images of shock and awe, Nye directs our eyes to a specific porch destroyed by a U.S. bomb in Baghdad, ants trying to go about their business in an Iraqi garden, a single Palestinian youth singing under a bridge before being killed by an Israeli bullet. This visibility of the small and the particular counteracts sublime images of war that erase the individual and preempt empathy. On the level of language, too, Nye eschews the grandiose, the abstract, and the obfuscating, which she identifies as the deliberately distancing rhetoric of those who would beguile us into war. Instead, her language privileges simplicity, clarity, and precision. In "Why I Could Not Accept Your Invitation," she refuses to participate in a cultural event of which she otherwise approves because the language in which the invitation is cast alienates her with its abstractions. She asserts that it is this kind of language – "*action-research oriented initiative / regionally based evaluation vehicles*" (Nye, "Why I Could Not," l. 5–7) – that "allows human beings to kill one another / systematically, abstractly, distantly" (l. 23–4). In poems such as "Dictionary in the Dark" and "Mohammad Zeid of Gaza, Aged 15," she makes clear that the stakes are not only aesthetic but ethical, as abstractions and euphemisms like "friendly fire" and "stray bullet" manipulate language in order to distort brutal truths about war and derail potential empathy with its victims.

Artist Wafaa Bilal's memoir *Shoot an Iraqi: Art, Life, and Resistance under the Gun* (2008) drives home still more viscerally the point that abstraction and anonymity enable violence. The memoir has a dual structure, giving the narrative both micro- and macro-dimensions: a month of diary entries centered on

Bilal's interactive electronic art installation, "Domestic Tension," in a Chicago gallery are interwoven with the backstory of his growing up under Saddam Hussein's regime. The devastating effects of the eight-year Iran-Iraq War, the Persian Gulf War, and UN sanctions against Iraq cover a sweep of years and characters in broad brushstrokes. By contrast, the gallery diary focuses on Bilal in a confined space, the narrative lens lingering on the details of his interactive installation like a duplicate webcam.

"Domestic Tension" goes beyond the visual, incorporating technology and tapping into the gaming world in order to reach an audience outside the artistic and academic worlds that Bilal inhabits. For a month, he confines himself within a gallery space the size of a prison cell, trying to escape the paintball shots fired at him remotely by Internet users. The mechanism is a testament to the genius of robotics: the paintball gun installed in the art gallery is filled with paintballs, and a gamer anywhere in the world can visit the site, hit a key, and fire a paintball at Bilal from a distance of just twenty feet, smearing the target with a yellow slime that reeks of fish oil. The entire "game" is streamed live with the help of a webcam; in addition, Bilal hosts an online chat between paintball attacks.

As with the structure of the memoir, the interactive installation connects the micro with the macro, the local with the global, and the personal with the political. Harnessing the very technology that enables the U.S. military to send unmanned drones – of the kind that killed Bilal's brother in Iraq – to attack by remote control, "Domestic Tension" makes an eloquent statement: "fresh-faced" American soldiers, bred on violent video games, are already desensitized to killing, and the impersonal nature of the real killings precludes reflection and accountability. By contrast, Bilal's gamers have to make a conscious choice to strike an Iraqi person, and to interrogate their motives for wanting to do so. The gamer's individual action cannot be divorced from its consequences for the individual on "the other side" of the screen, and the gamer must witness these consequences. To boot, Bilal invites dialogue with this Other in the chat room.

Bilal's aesthetic of smallness shrinks broad, all-encompassing abstractions of Iraq and Iraqis down to his one, individual, goggle- and keffiyeh-wearing self. As Carol Becker points out in her introduction to the memoir, though Bilal's identity as an artist is lost in the exhibit, his installation demonstrates "the unique ability of artists to engage the largest questions of life and society in their bodies, and to do so within mundane [i.e. small] gestures, in this case sitting – in full consciousness, yet without judgment – while 60,000 people took shots at him."⁴ Planting himself in the line of fire, Bilal insists that

Internet visitors engage with him, whether they come to the site out of a desire to hurt an “enemy” or because of their enthusiasm for gaming; out of boredom, or because they just like to watch. The users’ actions and reactions, like their motivations, run the gamut. The anonymity of the Internet encourages some to be ruthless in word and deed. Yet when hackers find a way to turn the paintball gun into a machine gun, firing at Bilal nonstop, other gamers figure out how to keep the gun averted from him. One shoots Bilal’s lamp while another – a U.S. marine who tells him he had never thought about the consequences of shooting a person in war before – brings him a new one. In fact, the Internet audience becomes a microcosm of the United States. As one commentator in the chat room puts it: “Some say they are trying to stop the shooting, a lot say they are having a party shooting him, most are watching. That, my friend, is America.”⁵

“Domestic Tension” also has a flesh-and-blood audience in the people who visit the gallery in Chicago, whether to see Bilal’s installation or some other exhibit. Because the gallery rents its space out for weddings in the evenings, members of wedding parties form an accidental, often bewildered, audience for Bilal, and once again the small group becomes representative of a larger dynamic ranging from curiosity and warmth to suspicion, to obliviousness. Observing Bilal as he observes the onlookers in the gallery, and observing his interactions not only with them but with the Internet gamers is the reader of *Shoot an Iraqi*. We readers are not physically present in the gallery or calling the shots electronically, but we form another ring of gawkers around Bilal. And as silent spectators of the action, we are implicated. On one level, in reading about the goings-on in the gallery, we get a bird’s-eye view of the world, where festivities and celebrations occur right next to scenes of violence and strife. On another level, Bilal’s shrinking of the U.S.-Iraq War down to the individual level of armchair attackers in their comfort zones shooting at a vulnerable human target in a “combat” zone turns readers into witnesses even as they sit reading in their own comfort zones. *Shoot an Iraqi* demands from these reader-witnesses more than mere observation: it calls for intellectual engagement, a heightened consciousness, empathy, and action.⁶

The insidious effect of abstract and generalized representations, or of sublime spectacles of war, is that we refuse to look. Performance studies critic Diana Taylor, in her analysis of Argentina’s Dirty War, points out: “The triumph of the atrocity was that it forced people to look away – a gesture that undid their sense of personal and communal cohesion even as it seemed to bracket them from their volatile surroundings. Spectacles of violence rendered the population

silent, deaf, and blind.”⁷ She calls this phenomenon “percepticide.” Though here Taylor refers to the threat of violent punishment as the cause of percepticide and silence, one may argue that sublime representations, in invoking awe and fear, as well as in erasing the individual, similarly cause percepticide: they prompt us to look away and thereby silence us. Wafaa Bilal’s insistence on countering sublime representations of the U.S.-Iraq War by shrinking it to the space of an art gallery eliminates “looking away” as an option.

Aesthetic of Smallness: 9/11 and the Place of Place

Even more than the U.S.-Iraq War or the violence in Palestine, the terrorist attacks of September 11 have been rendered in sublime terms. Rhetorical representations of 9/11 depict it not just as a pivotal chapter in American history but as a global event of unprecedented proportions. The tone was set by President George W. Bush’s declaration of a “War on Terror” instead of a more precise “War on Al Qaeda.” The former suggests Al Qaeda’s power as an elusive and ubiquitous enemy, limited by no geographical boundaries. But “War on Terror” is a formidable term that reaches for sublime abstractions in place of specific realities. It renders war faceless, spaceless, and timeless. The words unleash rhetorically the military tactic of “shock and awe” that followed so swiftly in the bombing of Afghanistan and the invasion of Iraq. Just as Nye’s and Bilal’s writings comment on the dangers of such vague, all-encompassing terms, Taylor has criticized the U.S. government and media’s tendency to treat 9/11 as a “limit event”:

The U.S. government and the media present [9/11] as a limit case, as “incommensurable,” the greatest, worst, most unimaginable and unspeakable crisis ever. . . . The language of tragedy and limit cases works against broader emancipatory politics because it detaches events, refusing to see connections and larger frameworks. Insulated claims to protagonism and universality work at odds with coalition building that enables cross-event understanding.⁸

In other words, representing 9/11 as a sublime event becomes yet another manifestation of American exceptionalism, precluding empathy and solidarity with other victims of traumatic violence throughout the world.

Muslim writers with ties to New York City have challenged this tendency toward sublime representations of 9/11 partly by insisting on it as the tragedy of a specific place – as New York City’s tragedy first.⁹ H. M. Naqvi’s *Home Boy* (2009) is set in New York, and while the narrator of Mohsin Hamid’s

The Reluctant Fundamentalist (2007), Changez, recounts his story in Lahore, Pakistan, most of the action of the novel occurs in New York. The main characters of these texts are eager to identify with, and contribute to, mainstream American society. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* Changez's Americanness is suggested in the fact that, like his author, he is a Princeton graduate, readily snapped up by Wall Street. Working in the finance industry, he not only serves America's capitalist interests and global power but represents them.

Similarly, in Naqvi's *Home Boy* the anglicized nicknames of the Pakistani New Yorkers (Chuck, AC, and Jimbo), as well as their occupations and preoccupations, signal their desire to be American. They lay claim to New York as "Metrostanis" and self-consciously insert themselves into its landscape. As Chuck tells us: "Though I was the only expatriate among us, [I] liked to believe I'd since claimed the city and the city had claimed me."¹⁰ *Home Boy* represents the 9/11 attacks not in the sublime terms in which President George W. Bush's speech was cast but in very concrete terms of place: "Every New Yorker has a 9/11 story, and every New Yorker has a need to repeat it, to pathologically revisit the tragedy, until the tragedy becomes but a story."¹¹ Here 9/11 becomes New York's tragedy, turning every New Yorker into an ancient mariner, compelled to work through the trauma in word and memory until it can be contained in a story. Narrative containment implies a shape and form, cause and effect, and a structure that lends coherence to isolated details. But no one story of 9/11 can contain them all, and Chuck knows better than to offer us a meta-narrative. Instead, he tells us quietly, reverently, what he witnessed of the towers through the office window where he awaited an interview. Identifying himself as a cosmopolitan New Yorker – not Pakistani, not American, not even Metrostani – he simply gives us his small, personal 9/11 story to put alongside others.

After 9/11 the young men's Metrostani identities do little to save them from unjust imprisonment as potential terrorists in the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn. In fact, the Metropolitan Detention Center emerges as a new landmark of New York in the terrorized consciousness of the novel's Muslims. Naqvi's way of countering sublime representations of 9/11, then, is to focus on events from the perspective of a New Yorker who experiences the terror of witnessing, the frantic calls to friends to ascertain whether or not they are alive, and the chaos of closed roads and rubble. In this polarized landscape, there is no room for the nuanced identity of the Metrostani, but *Home Boy* remains rooted in New York City as the novel closes with Sinatra's tribute to the city.

Aesthetic of Connectivity: Crossing Lines

Dystopic representations of America notwithstanding, the aesthetic of smallness that emerges in writings by Muslim American authors interlocks with an aesthetic of connectivity. We saw this interlocking pattern most clearly in Bilal's *Shoot an Iraqi*, in which the author shrinks the U.S.-Iraq War down to a cell-sized gallery space in order to invite reflection and dialogue on the part of the attackers. Similarly, in *You & Yours*, though Nye depicts the asymmetrical violence against Iraqis and Palestinians, her poetry moves toward connectivity. Throughout *You & Yours*, the local and the global inhabit each other. In fact, the very structure of the volume is a call to deconstruct binaries. The poems are divided under two distinct subheadings, "You" and "Yours," but all rationalizations for this division – for instance, the idea that the "You" poems are personal/local/micro whereas the "Yours" poems are political/global/macro – prove to be arbitrary. Moreover, both groupings fall under an umbrella poem that straddles the two subheadings and is emphatically titled "Cross that Line." The poem invokes Paul Robeson's 1952 concert at the International Peace Arch, on the border of Washington State and British Columbia. At a time when the FBI had revoked Robeson's passport, his voice traversed the border while his body remained within the United States. The last stanza of "Cross that Line" forms an apostrophe to Robeson, asking him to remind us "*What countries may we / sing into? / What lines should we all / be crossing?*"¹² I have discussed this poem at length elsewhere; what I wish to emphasize here is that Nye's *You & Yours*, from its very first poem – which literally transcends the volume's two-part division – not only demands that we question our presumptions about boundaries but also draws attention to their permeability and challenges us to action.

Connectivity is a more complicated matter in the Pakistani American texts, however. In both *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Home Boy*, connections across political, racial, and religious lines are shown to be unsustainable inasmuch as the American lives of the Pakistan-identified characters unravel completely. In both novels, however, there remains a desire to defy the polarizing rhetoric and to connect in spite of it. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Hamid collapses the binaries of West/East, American/Pakistani, pacifist/terrorist, and rationalist/fundamentalist in a manner that is at once subtle and incisive. Changez's narrative "I" is pitted against an oppositional "you," whom we know to be a white American male. However, because the entire narrative is a monologue, we never hear directly from Changez's audience. Instead, his thoughts, actions, and motivations can only be inferred through the narrator's

own words and responses. But how we interpret Changez's words depends on where we situate ourselves in a world that forces us into polarized positions. Since the September 11 attacks and the subsequent U.S.-led violence against Muslim-majority countries like Afghanistan and Iraq, the most salient geopolitical divide is not so much East and West as Muslim and non-Muslim. Collapsing faith, culture, and political ideology – very much as Jihadists do – U.S. and European media often use “Muslim,” “Islamic,” and “Islamist” without defining their terms or distinguishing among them. Hamid's novel insists that we not only define but interrogate our presumptions, and in the process he makes it impossible for us to sit comfortably on either side of Changez's monologue. If our primary identification is with the American listener, we may well find ourselves as uneasy as he is, and when he seems to be pulling out a gun, we may interpret that as self-defense against an enemy. But if our own identities, experiences, and politics orient us primarily in Changez, we may be inclined to see *him* as the victim, first of racial profiling, and then of the CIA's global terror. We may see Changez not as consumed with irrational hatred of America but as striving for checks and balances to the reach of a superpower in his homeland. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist's* brilliance lies in anticipating – indeed, shaping – these apparently irreconcilable responses in its readers, making them both entirely plausible while cornering us in the act of stereotyping one character or the other. And here the complexity of the novel's title makes its impact: while the narrative shows that Changez has rejected capitalist fundamentalism, it leaves uncertain whether or not he has become an “anti-American” Islamist fundamentalist.

Changez may or may not have exchanged one kind of fundamentalism for another, but the fundamentalist philosophies of “West” and “East” have much in common. Recall that the rhetoric of the War on Terror relies on sublime representations that inspire shock and awe, as do the violent speeches and spectacles sponsored by Al Qaeda or the Taliban. As Anna Agathangelou and L. H. M. Ling point out, both America's War on Terror and Al Qaeda's Jihadism are transnational, imperialist ideologies, relying on war and territorial control. Writing in 2004, the writers state: “Both Bush and bin Laden transnationalize their respective militaries, not only to gather more allies by crossing borders but also to propagate an internationalist rhetoric that distracts attention from each camp's exploitation of the masses economically, politically, religiously, and physically.”¹³ Hamid's novel, in mirroring the supposed binaries of a post-9/11 world order, questions, if not collapses, them. It confronts us with the reality that Changez articulates in speaking of his relationship with Erica: “It is not always possible to restore one's boundaries

after they have been blurred and made permeable by a relationship” (Hamid, 197). I would add that it is especially difficult to restore the boundaries of a readerly self once we have been made to locate ourselves on a continuum of fundamentalisms. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* may leave us unsettled by the interaction between Changez and the American, but in blurring their representational distinctions, it implies, and opens up the possibility of, connections between them.

Like Changez, the narrator of Naqvi’s *Home Boy* returns to Pakistan feeling like a marked man. Yet an aesthetic of connectivity is more evident in *Home Boy*, especially in the abiding love that Chuck and his friends feel for New York City, as well as in the character of The Duck – Jimbo’s white girlfriend, who provides an emotional center of gravity for the youths and uses her connections to get Jimbo out of jail. The most significant movement toward connectivity here, however, is lateral rather than vertical, between brown and black rather than between brown and white. The novel’s epigraphs include the hip-hop duo Erik B. and Rakim, and Chuck introduces himself and his friends by naming hip-hop, and more specifically gangsta-rap, among the cultural influences that define them.

After 9/11, however, the Pakistani “home boys” realize that cultural permeability in brown-black relations entails more than pop-culture coolness. At the crucial moment before their arrest in The Shaman’s apartment, AC can best express himself in the lyrics of the gangsta-rappers Above The Law. His invocation of Above The Law and of specific individuals in American history represents intellectuals, writers, historians, and political anarchists – all with immigrant histories like AC’s own – who have asserted their right to freedom of speech by questioning the establishment. Into this list of counterculture Americans, AC inserts himself as a “self-respecting Muslim atheist, just like any, ah, nonpracticing Christian, secular Jew, or carnivorous Hindu.”¹⁴ In other words, he reaches across traditional groupings to articulate his alignment with nontraditional Americans of diverse backgrounds. With tragic irony, AC’s identification with African Americans culminates with his imprisonment alongside the numbers of black men given harsher sentences than they deserve.

In general, nonblack immigrants seeking a piece of the American pie realize that the shortest path to it is by way of disidentifying with African Americans. As Toni Morrison put it in a 1973 *Time Magazine* article, “On the Backs of Blacks”: “In race talk the move into mainstream America always means buying into the notion of American blacks as the real aliens. Whatever the ethnicity or nationality of the immigrant, his nemesis is

understood to be African Americans.”¹⁵ However, after 9/11, the hypervisibility of South Asian Americans, including the currency of the slur “sand nigger,” has encouraged them to reconsider how they locate themselves within the sociopolitical fabric of the United States. In *Home Boy*, Chuck experiences such a moment of epiphany in his prison cell. Like AC, in this fraught moment Chuck can best express his anger in language made available to him by gangsta-rap. The song “Fuck Tha Police” famously brought Ice Cube and his group, N.W.A., to the FBI’s attention in 1988. Although Chuck mentions the album (*Straight Outta Compton*) on the very first page of the novel, he doesn’t realize its full import until he finds himself similarly hounded by the FBI.

Yet these events do not alienate Chuck completely, as he leaves us with an alternative frame within which to conceptualize his departure from post-9/11 America: “When you think about it, the peculiarly American trope of escape has informed narratives spanning the western to the road comedy, from *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* to *Thelma and Louise*. . . . They are outlaws or are rendered outlaws by the whimsical, uncharitable vicissitudes of the modern world. Like the residents of New Hampshire, they aspire to live free or die.”¹⁶ Remarkably, Chuck casts his very alienation from mainstream U.S. society as an *American* phenomenon. And here, too, he characteristically roots himself in popular culture. His fear of the police becomes the stuff of westerns; the fates that befall him, AC, and Jimbo are recast as the doomed friendships of popular lore. His all-but-expulsion from America is narrated as an American desire to live free or die. In this way, Chuck retains his claim on America. And through Chuck, Naqvi claims his place in American literature. In using the language of “tropes” and “youthful antiheroes,” Naqvi draws attention to the quintessential Americanness of his novel and to its nuanced aesthetic of connectivity.

The Aesthetics of It All: Smallness, Place, and Connectivity

The separate aesthetic strands discussed here are organically intertwined in the writings of the Palestinian American poet Suheir Hammad. In both of her 1996 volumes, *Drops of This Story* and *Born Palestinian, Born Black*, she particularizes the general and makes visceral the abstract, shows that the local and the global inhabit each other, and meshes her connection to place – both Brooklyn and Palestine – with a connection to other marginalized groups, especially African Americans.

The pained and impassioned prose-poems of Hammad's memoir, *Drops of This Story*, chronicle her birth in Jordan to Palestinian refugees, her arrival in New York through Beirut at the age of five, and her growing up in Brooklyn among racially diverse, socioeconomically disadvantaged communities. Alone among the writers discussed here, Hammad represents America's urban poor. In contrast to middle-class writers of color, she has grown up not in isolated white suburbia but with a sense of herself as one among many individuals from diverse communities of color. The impact of Hammad's working-class Brooklyn roots on her art is evident in her politically integrated vision that sees the plight of Palestinians as connected to the plight of the urban poor in America; in her use of the black vernacular, and in her drawing on both Arab and African American poets, as well as on hip-hop, for the rhythms of her own poetry.¹⁷ As she has said in an interview, "Because hip-hop vernacular and aesthetics are at the core of my Americanness, I was able to appreciate Naomi's [Shihab Nye], Etel Adnan's, and Darwish's contributions, but I knew enough about myself to know that they weren't speaking to my particular urban, lower-class experience."¹⁸ While Naqvi's *Home Boy* also demonstrates brown-black confluences, Hammad remains unique among Muslim American writers in the extent to which her art synthesizes – without conflating – African American and Palestinian American aesthetics and politics.

Such synthesis is not surprising in a young poet who has credited Jamaican American writer June Jordan's poetry with changing her life. Hammad's very title *Born Palestinian, Born Black* invokes Jordan's "Moving towards Home"¹⁹:

I was born a Black woman
and now
I am become a Palestinian

Jordan's poem validated teenaged Suheir's own sense of self and history, showed her that solidarity could be real, and above all, showed that she, too, must choose words over violence. The title of Jordan's poem and its explicit call to come "home" resonates with the desire that laces Hammad's own writings. An integrated aesthetic of smallness and place is doubly charged for Hammad, who describes her desire as "[t]he want of my feet for Palestinian soil and Brooklyn concrete"²⁰ Her place, her home, is both the land from which she and her family have been displaced and the here and now of Brooklyn's streets.

Hammad's dual orientation in place informs the "urban, lower-class experience" to which she alludes in her writings and interviews, and vice versa;

moreover, this interaction of place and class impels her to define war more broadly than most Arab and Muslim American writers do. For Hammad, the daily war waged in and on Brooklyn neighborhoods is inextricably linked to daily, state-sponsored wars waged globally. At one point, *Drops of This Story* weaves three continents together: “Pictures of South Africa I saw looked like the pictures of Palestine, only darker. A moot point. South African youth would throw whatever was nearby at the soldiers who kept them down. I saw the rocks of crystallized revolution being thrown in Brooklyn too.”²¹ The asymmetrical violence in apartheid South Africa, Palestine, and Brooklyn stems from harsh, racially inflected injustices buttressed by social and civil institutions. In the absence of support from other nations and communities, revolution/Intifada articulates itself in small, individual gestures of rock throwing and spray painting, or in suicidal missions, including the drug-related ones on Brooklyn streets. But Hammad insists that the impulse toward suicide in Palestine and Brooklyn must be combated with will and words. As she says in the poem “Suicide Watch”: “we gotsa / gotta get off this suicide watch we on.”²² She does, however, represent the victims of racial-political murders as martyrs, including Malcolm X and her uncle Hammad, killed by Israelis as a teenager. She claims both men for her own political genealogy because though temporally, geographically, and racially distant from each other, both were victims of violent apartheid. But having learned from June Jordan, Hammad wills herself beyond the violence. Drawing on the water metaphor that runs throughout the memoir, she casts her uncle and Malcolm X not only as heroes of resistance but as her muses. They thus become her sources of a holistic political, spiritual, and artistic inspiration.

Hammad’s integrated aesthetics and politics culminate in the rich, wrenching evocations of her 2002 poem, “First Writing Since.” Written within days of the September 11 attacks, the poem articulates Hammad’s multiple orientations: as a New Yorker, as an Arab, and as an American; as a woman and a sister; as a witness, a mourner, and a pacifist. She breaks the horror down to small, essential details: “sky where once was steel. / smoke where once was flesh”; and gives us the sights, smells, and sounds. She reduces the abstract rhetoric of the attack on America to particulars: families holding “shaky printouts” of their loved ones, individuals who are named and identified not by nationality, race, or religion, but by their loving relationships to other people: Iris, the mother; Priti, the wife; George a.k.a. Adel, the son – all names that speak of diverse racial and religious backgrounds.²³

Like the narrators in Hamid’s and Naqvi’s novels, Hammad responds to 9/11 as a New Yorker: “i have never felt less american and more new

yorker – particularly / brooklyn, than these past days.” But she also responds with fear for her brothers because the backlash against Arabs already rages around her. She seeks hope and comfort in the embrace of New Yorkers like the white woman who understands that as an Arab American with a brother in the U.S. Navy, Hammad has “double trouble.” Thus Hammad’s aesthetic of place dovetails with her aesthetic of connectivity; in “First Writing Since” the place she claims is at once local and global. Like Nye, she collapses those boundaries, declaring that “over there is over here.”

Indeed, Hammad’s vision of the human community is such that she invites us to imagine the lives of the terrorists:

i do not know how bad a life has to break in order to kill.

i have never been so hungry that i willed hunger

i have never been so angry as to want to control a gun over a pen.

not really. even as a woman, as a Palestinian, as a broken human being. never this broken.²⁴

The lines paradoxically establish a connection between the speaker and the terrorists while affirming her distance from them. Moreover, the “I” is a collective one that includes us all. While we cannot justify the violence, we also cannot presume to know what has driven the attackers to it. In Michael Rothberg’s words, “‘First writing since’ is unsettling: it unsettles us through empathic address by families of victims, and it unsettles us by refusing to provide easy explanations or exoneration for the violence of September 11, by refusing to take sides in the ‘us or them’ logic of the dominant political class.”²⁵ Hammad’s poem ends with an explicit call to connect in the face of divisive rhetoric:

we got to carry each other now.

you are either with life, or against it.

affirm life.²⁶

In these lines, Hammad dismantles Bush’s declaration to the world that “Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists,” and Hillary Clinton’s statement that “Every nation has to either be with us or against us.” Hammad’s call to affirm life, repeated like a chant, rejects the binary that both Republican and Democrat leaders established in the days following 9/11. The pronouns “we,” “you,” and the implied “they,” intended as nationalist divisions in the rhetoric of the politicians, are leveled in Hammad’s global, life-affirming “we,” which rejects war as a constructive response to 9/11.

Conclusion

In the works of contemporary Arab and Muslim American writers, we find an aesthetic pattern in which smallness interlocks with connectivity. An emphasis on place bridges the two aspects of this aesthetic as it provides a smaller, more specific canvas while insisting on connections within and beyond that landscape. Naomi Shihab Nye, Wafaa Bilal, Mohsin Hamid, H. M. Naqvi, and Suheir Hammad, in their narrations of war and violence in the United States, Iraq, and Palestine, employ an aesthetic of smallness and connectivity as an oppositional stance to the ideological implications of the Kantian sublime that undergird the mainstream media's visual and verbal representations of this violence. Against the erasures of sublime representations, these authors posit the particularities of the individual and the personal. Their insistence on such a focal point for our gaze enables empathy rather than distance. And here emerges an ironic countersublime of love: before either Burke or Kant, John Baillie identified a "sublime of benevolence, extending itself to the remotest of mankind."²⁷ If the aesthetic of smallness employed by Muslim American writers deflates the military sublime, their interlocking aesthetic of connectivity poses the countersublime of benevolence, which demands that we "cross that line." These authors' works distinguish themselves among post-9/11 writings both in their aesthetic strategies and in their ability to interrupt the continued mythologizing of Arabs and Muslims as alien, hostile presences in U.S. literature and culture.

Notes

- 1 I use "Muslim" as a secular term that many have claimed as a political rather than religious identity since 9/11. My own identification with "Muslim" as a secular and political marker receives fuller treatment in Samina Najmi, "Teaching as a Pakistani American Muslim Feminist," *Asian American Literary Review* 2.1.5 (Fall 2011): 17–24.
- 2 For a fuller discussion of the military sublime, see Samina Najmi, "Naomi Shihab Nye's Aesthetic of Smallness and the Military Sublime," *MELUS* 35.2 (2010): 151–71.
- 3 Francois Debrix, "The Sublime Spectatorship of War: The Erasure of the Event in America's Politics of Terror and Aesthetics of Violence," *Millennium* 34.3 (2006): 768.
- 4 Carol Becker, introduction to Wafaa Bilal, *Shoot an Iraqi* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2008), xx.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 86.
- 6 For an extended and carefully nuanced analysis of empathy, see Rajini Srikanth, *Constructing the Enemy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012). I use the word in Srikanth's sense of "a transformative empathy that has the potential to alter profoundly both the empathizer and the recipient of empathy without degrading either" (37).

She argues that any discussion of empathy must consider the asymmetrical power dynamic in which it occurs, and distinguishes among compassionate, strategic, and ethical empathy.

- 7 Diana Taylor, *Disappearing Acts* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 122–3.
- 8 Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 263.
- 9 In this they resemble Art Spiegelman, whose graphic memoir of 9/11, *In the Shadow of No Towers* (New York: Pantheon, 2004), protests what he sees as the appropriation of New York City's tragedy by George W. Bush's government.
- 10 H. M. Naqvi, *Home Boy* (New York: Crown, 2009), 4.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 119.
- 12 Naomi Shihab Nye, *You & Yours* (Rochester, NY: Boa Editions, 2005), 9.
- 13 Anna Agathangelou and L. H. M. Ling, "Power, Borders, Security, Wealth," *International Studies Quarterly* 48.3 (September 2004): 520.
- 14 Naqvi, *Home Boy*, 122.
- 15 Quoted in Stephen Steinberg, "Immigration, African Americans, and Race Discourse," *New Politics* 10.3 (Summer 2005), <http://newpol.org/content/immigration-african-americans-and-race-discourse> (accessed October 11, 2013).
- 16 Naqvi, *Home Boy*, 251–2.
- 17 While we must always be vigilant about blendings and borrowings, Hammad's rootedness in the urban black vernacular represents an organic aspect of her identity and therefore resists charges of appropriation.
- 18 Marcy Jane Knopf-Newman, "Interview with Suheir Hammad," *MELUS* 31.4 (Winter 2006): 79.
- 19 June Jordan, "Moving towards Home," *Living Room* (New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1985), 134.
- 20 Suheir Hammad, *Drops of This Story* (New York: Harlem River, 1996), 88.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 60.
- 22 Suheir Hammad, *Born Palestinian, Born Black* (1996; repr., Brooklyn, NY: UpSet, 2010), 32.
- 23 Suheir Hammad, "First Writing Since," *Meridians* 2.2 (July 2002): 254–5.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 154.
- 25 Michael Rothberg, "'There Is No Poetry in This,'" in *Trauma at Home*, ed. Judith Greenberg (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2003), 154.
- 26 Hammad, "First Writing Since," 258.
- 27 John Baillie, *An Essay on the Sublime* (1747); excerpted in *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics Theory*, ed. Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 87–100.

Thick Time and Space: Karen Tei Yamashita's Aesthetics

KANDICE CHUH

While the inauguration of Asian American literary studies is commonly understood as dated to the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the beginnings of Asian American literatures are somewhat harder to locate.¹ This uncertainty is in part an effect of the indefiniteness of the boundaries and constitution of Asian American literature as well as of the idea of Asian America. Time and space prove to be powerful categories of analysis in helping us apprehend the stakes and significance of these uncertainties; they both give shape to and complicate the meaningfulness of the construct "Asian American." Where dominant narratives of immigration to the United States offer a simple and sometimes simplistic, linear story of movement from a putatively less desirable place to the self-proclaimed land of opportunity and promise, Asian American history tells a more complicated one of the exploitative labor demands of capital, the consequences of U.S. empire building across the globe that precipitated the migrations of refugees, and the integral nature of racism to U.S. national identity. Instead of a definite break from a premigration past, it tells a story of cultural continuities and persistent ways of knowing and being that take shape in different forms upon migration. The generations of U.S.-born persons that have followed the migrants and refugees who came to the United States from Asia continue to be assumed to be from elsewhere, which attests to the racial barriers to full incorporation into the nation-state. *There* and *here* assume significance for those racialized as Asian in ways that identify Asian American history as a generative site for the study of the processes of racial and national identity formation.

Asian American literatures represent and elucidate this history in a number of ways, including the regular employment of tropes of immigration and labor, and themes of the challenges to assimilation and acculturation.² In these ways overtly politically engaged, the literatures at the same time attest to the inexhaustiveness of identity as Asian American to capture the breadth of imagination, voice, and formal qualities that characterize them. Indeed, one

way of understanding the rubric “Asian American literature” is to see it as speaking of the ways in which literary expression both represents and contests the meaning of Asian American identities. Taking as a point of departure the commonplace definition of literature as writing that estranges us from the familiar, and acknowledging as well the ways that *Asian America* is a term that implies a kind of new geography, one that raises questions about how spatial thinking subtends categories of sociopolitical identity, we can understand the inquisitiveness that arguably defines Asian American literary studies.

There are arguably few writers whose work compels us to recognize these features of Asian American literary studies as powerfully as does Karen Tei Yamashita. Her work not only elucidates the preoccupation of Asian American literary studies with spatial thinking, but also exemplifies a playful critical curiosity that manifests through formal experimentation and an unusually capacious imagination. Her thematic and formal interests and experiments have both presaged and influenced the interests of Asian American literary studies in the spatial protocols that organize the meaningfulness of “Asian America.” At the same time, Yamashita’s work also and persistently insists that literature enables us to apprehend the extraordinariness – the complex underpinnings and intricate relations – that underlies quotidian existence. Her prose writings include the novels *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* (1990), *Brazil-Marú* (1992), *Tropic of Orange* (1997), and *I Hotel* (2010), as well as *Circle K Cycles* (2001), which is a collection of fictional and nonfictional pieces, some written in English and others in Portuguese.³ This work collectively estranges us from Asian America; it allows us to recognize “Asian America” as a potent fiction, one whose meaningfulness depends on underlying structures and histories often organized by conventional spatial and temporal logics, and that are luminously elucidated by imaginative articulations. Yamashita’s interests across her writings in the relationships between natural and human-made worlds, the distribution of resources and channeling of raw materials by both state and commercial forces, and the perhaps surprising sources for and pleasures to be found in the act of making art, manifest in her composition of literary worlds that bring to light the material conditions that, ordinarily unseen, lie deep beneath and shape the present.

Yamashita reminds us to be astonished by the ordinary and the mundane – to revel in what can be known, thought, and imagined, even as we acknowledge deeply and seriously the violence and vulnerability that characterize life under racial capitalism. This is the particular kind of complexity she makes available through the sense of space and time she articulates; it is a *thick* space and time, an aesthetics that is bemused by tidy narratives of Asian American identity

formation, ones that operate according to the developmental temporality that posits a premigration and immigrant past against a naturalized present as American. Such narratives assume that identity as American and identification with the U.S. nation are the objectives to which migrants necessarily aspire, which are goals that serve the interests of U.S. nationalism and neatly cover over the structures of inequality that prohibit their achievement. In contrast, by articulating a decidedly nonteleological temporality, Yamashita's work situates the present as embedded in a geologic, epochal temporality; the present emerges from her writings as constituted by this long history. Her literary worlds invoke the *long durée* of modernity, in Ferdinand Braudel's sense: it identifies long-standing structures and conditions as subtending the formation of contemporary life rather than focusing primarily on immediate causes and consequences.⁴ Yamashita, in other words, thickens time and space such that the depth and breadth of the material grounds that form the conditions of possibility for life and thought are brought to bear on the apprehension of present circumstances. In contrast to the linear temporality of the kinds of developmental and civilizational discourses characterizing the nation and empire building that have shaped and continue to shape world geopolitics to which "modernity" refers, Yamashita's aesthetic thickens time to acknowledge change and evolution without positing a putatively inevitable end.

The discussions that follow elaborate these claims. I hope to suggest through these discussions that Yamashita's aesthetics explain at least in part the significance of her work to Asian American literary history. I believe its import lies in how it compellingly invites us to mobilize Asian American literature and literary studies not toward the ends of securing definitive knowledge "about" Asian America, but instead toward crafting ways of knowing correlating to a sensibility of thick space and time.

Undisciplined Geographies and Exuberant Forms

To understand the significance of Yamashita's work, we may begin by acknowledging that Asian American literature is a field that generally refers to work by writers of Asian descent, and that it has tended to privilege writing that addresses themes pertaining to the presence of Asians in the United States and the history and politics circumscribing the emergence of Asian American subjectivity. These themes include immigration, belonging, and experiences with anti-Asian racism, and while these do not exhaust the terrain of Asian American histories, experiences, and subjectivities, they remain central facets of Asian American literary history. This is partly a consequence of the context

within which Asian American literary studies gained institutional legibility. As Asian American literature became established as a category of literary criticism in the closing decades of the twentieth century, it came to reflect Asian American studies' commitments to the pursuit of social justice and the eradication of inequality. How best to advance these aims has continued to preoccupy Asian American literary studies, just as it has the interdisciplinary field of Asian American studies of which it is a part. In the context of the civil rights era and its aftermath, Asian American studies framed these pursuits predominantly in ways that showed how anti-Asian racism through exclusion and other state policies has been a formative part of U.S. history. Accordingly, Asian American studies sought to establish the Americanness of Asians in the United States.

Fairly quickly, the limitations of such a strategy as the privileged means of contesting anti-Asian racism became evident. Critical attention to U.S. imperialism, for example, brought about by the insights of Filipino American studies scholars, put into question the desirability of such a strong identification with the United States. Such critique, coupled with the establishment of Pacific Islander studies as a consistent interlocutor with Asian American studies, made it necessary to ask whether – and at what cost – national belonging should be the aim of Asian Americanist politics and pedagogies. At the same time, critics working in many different fields including Asian American studies, brought to bear an understanding of how capitalism in its late-twentieth-century form might best be described as a “transnational” capitalism. In contrast to earlier stages, transnational capitalism operates by a logic that is only weakly interested in profiting the nation-state in which a corporation is located. Thus, if one country's labor laws require higher wages, a transnational corporation simply turns to another in search of “cheap” labor. Coupled with studies that showed the diasporic affiliations and attachments that substantial numbers of immigrants and their descendants continue to have with their countries of origin, these disparately emergent critical insights encouraged Asian American studies to reflect carefully on the spatial frames or protocols, including the thematic preoccupations, central to the field.

These contexts explain in part the critical attention that Yamashita's work has elicited in Asian American literary studies, and also reflect the ways that literary expression like hers offer insight and guidance in the navigation of the political terrain. Critics like Rachel Lee and Caroline Rody have turned to Yamashita's novels to articulate to the transnational dimensions of “American” subjectivities,⁵ while others identify a “global” or “planetary” frame issuing from her oeuvre.⁶ *Tropic of Cancer* readily provides evidence

for such analyses.⁷ The formal structure of the novel reflects the difficulties of rendering the frantic pace of life characterizing this contemporary age of late capitalism, insofar as it is a tightly orchestrated novel. In the novel, the Tropic of Cancer, the circle of latitude that marks the northern-most position of the sun at its zenith (the June solstice), has become embedded in an orange that has grown on a tree planted directly on the tropic. Discovered by Rafaela Cortez, the caretaker of California-based journalist Gabriel Balboa's second home in Mazatlán, Mexico, along with her son, Sol, the orange's northward journey announces the novel's preoccupation with the making and unmaking of place. Literalizing the impact of transnational capitalism, which is presented as a continuation of the genealogies of empire and colonialism through which the United States was founded and is sustained, the novel follows as the orange crosses over into California and disfigures and reshapes the cartographies by which Mexico and the United States are at once joined and partitioned.

Gabriel, a college-educated Chicano who, eight years prior to the commencement of the novel's action, "felt a spontaneous, sudden passion for the acquisition of land, the sensation of a timeless vacation, the erotic tastes of chili pepper and salty breezes, and for Mexico" (5), intends the house in Mazatlán to be "a spacious hacienda . . . circa 1800, with rustic touches . . . but with modern appliances" (6), and expresses this desire by showing the workers hired to renovate the house "scraps of photos torn from slick architectural magazines: tile work, hot tubs, wet bars, arches, decks, and landscaping" (6). His inattention to locality, in a distinct evocation of colonialism's transplantation of plant and animal life in accordance with imperialist design rather than appropriateness to place, causes him to plant trees that cannot survive and to rely on appliances made dysfunctional by the humid environment. That the Tropic of Cancer crossed through the land he would come to own was appealing to Gabriel invokes the environmental thoughtlessness and devastation accompanying the accumulation of property through imperialism. Gabriel is not so much a villain in this story, however, as he is a haplessly attached victim of an overmediated idea of inhabiting a romanticized image. Indeed, it is the careless ease with which he clumsily restages Spanish colonialism that is emphasized. Through this emphasis, Yamashita underscores the potency of acculturation into the aesthetics of empire. Intent to do harm is beside the point; casual imperialism is commonsensical within this context, and formal education wholly inadequate to the task of producing the critical consciousness necessary for Gabriel to be able to acknowledge the material historicities underlying his romantic ideal.

Chaos ensues as a major traffic artery – the Harbor Freeway – collapses in the distortion caused by the migrating circle of latitude, and the novel’s cast of characters, each with his or her own storyline, traverses this apocalyptic event. Subplots of the novel include organ trafficking, immigration fraud, social reform, journalism and ambition, and immortality, all unfolding against and sometimes through each other, as the lives of the characters of the novel are shown to be interconnected. *Tropic of Orange* is sharply satirical about the promises of multiculturalism to create an egalitarian existence without a radical transformation in the distribution of resources, and eschews making heroes out of minority subjects. While featuring a thoroughly multiracial and multicultural ensemble of characters, there is nothing celebratory in that representational diversity. Rather, as Buzzworm, the black social reformer notes as he stays with Emi, a Japanese American television reporter who is dying from a stray bullet from the military strike deployed to end the encampments of homeless people on the collapsed highway (they have occupied the abandoned cars), “Gonna take more than holdin’ hands to start that revolution” (253). By refusing to ameliorate the mutual distrust and animus that has characterized Buzzworm’s and Emi’s relationship through the course of the novel, Yamashita subverts the expectation of sentimental camaraderie that accompanies the celebratory rhetoric of liberal multiculturalism. Instead, she emphasizes a considerably more radical idea of the grounds necessary for social transformation. Namely, it will require nothing short of grappling with the seemingly undefeatable advance of capitalism – figured in the novel as the pro-wrestler SUPERNAFTA – in the spirit of the comic book hero who characteristically fights overwhelming villains to the bitter end. Literalizing what it means to “grapple with” capitalism, Yamashita lays the challenge before us as one of directly confronting the fictions through which it takes living form.

The crafting of this novel as seven stories, told over seven days, structurally enacts the need to retell history again and again, from different perspectives and in different ways; in this sense, the novel exhibits a formal elasticity. In pace and style sometimes resembling a newscast that cuts from story to story, scene to scene – notably, a style favored by Emi – and with characters evocative of literary genres and traditions as varied as comic books (SUPERNAFTA) and magical realism (Archangel), *Tropic of Orange* projects a sense that not only is social collapse impending, but that it has already begun to arrive, that it has long ago been set in motion, and that the question remaining now is precisely the one implied in Buzzworm’s remark: If not surface solidarity and multicultural celebration, what can be done to work within this context of (impending) collapse to craft something new?

Yamashita asks through this novel that we stretch our spatial imaginations, and suggests that doing so prompts consideration of the ways in which reality and the imagination cannot be neatly separated. For, as we follow the impact of the moving Tropic, we cannot but be aware of the fictionality of a latitude, like that of the boundary between Mexico and the United States. To be fictional, Yamashita reminds us, does not negate its material significance. Nor is apprehending the extraordinary – the supernatural – as part of the material world so difficult; rather, the logics of state-sponsored capitalism that produce such sharp inequality but are so much a part of the fabric of everyday life are in this context rendered as that which is incomprehensible. Within what logic worlds, through what sensibilities, can the ideology of racial capitalism be brought into relief? For Yamashita, the creation of such alternatives requires fantastic acts of imagination.

Tropic of Orange is not the first of Yamashita's novels to play with form and imaginative possibility to shed light on and rescope the temporal parameters and geographies of Asian American literary studies. Her earliest novels, *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*⁸ and *Brazil-Marú*,⁹ bring Japan, Brazil, and the United States together within a common frame. Informed by the research Yamashita conducted while in residence in Brazil for extended periods of time, these novels immediately announce her literary imagination's eccentricity from the conventional geographies of Asian American literature. *Brazil-Marú* concerns itself with the migration of Japanese to Brazil in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While, through this era, anti-Asian immigration sentiment and policies took increasing hold in the United States, by the end of World War II some two hundred thousand Japanese migrants had found their way to Brazil and had established communes participating in the growing agribusiness industry. The novel opens with a rehearsal of this immigration history and unfolds to make note of U.S. exclusionary legislation, thus establishing a comparative framework that enables U.S. readers unfamiliar with Brazilian history to find a point of entry.¹⁰ *Circle K Cycles*, which is constituted in part by Yamashita's writings for an Internet travel journal during her residency in Japan in 1997, and in part by short fiction, collage, photographs, and maps that together intend "to paint as varied and textured a portrait as possible of the life I saw and experienced during that time," has at its center her interest in the Brazilian community living in Japan.¹¹ The *dekasegi*, or migrant workers, who are mentioned at the close of *Brazil-Marú* and for whom late-twentieth-century Brazilian economic depression catalyzes migration to Japan in search of work, are revisited in this later work.

Like both of these, *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* is also framed as a narrative of migration, but in contrast to them this novel employs an array of fantastic characters including a narrator that is a small whirling sphere invisibly attached to the forehead of Kazumasa Ishimaru, the novel's protagonist; the three-armed J. B. Tweep, a U.S. American transnational capitalist; and, the three-breasted French ornithologist, Michelle Mabelle. Where *Brazil-Marú* takes *Emile* as its interlocutor, as Ursula K. Heise suggests, Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) and Mário de Andrade's *Macunaíma* (1928) are arguably intertexts for this book. Yamashita's literary genealogy, in other words, includes Latin American literatures and especially its magical realist traditions and thematization of the challenges of producing a sense of locality given the impact of colonialism and empire.¹²

I offer this schematic overview to refer to Yamashita's orchestration of the geopolitics, capitalist flows, and practices of empire that produce Brazil, Japan, and the United States, as deeply interlinked by the conditions that precipitate migration and subject formation local to each. This composition combines with the geographies of communal farming and living (in *Brazil-Marú*) and the destruction of environment vis-à-vis the processes of capitalism (in *Through the Arc*), with the invocation of multilateral migrations and the histories of the genocidal dispossession of indigenous peoples and ways of life, to conjure a cartography delineated by flows and movement in lieu of a geopolitical border. Indeed, her writings sharply illuminate the thinness of such territorial boundaries as a mechanism for organizing the study of culture, politics, or criticism, while acknowledging the material impact of state power in regulating movement. Rather than focusing on the questions that arise directly from critically acknowledging the fictionality and potency of borders, Yamashita's work generatively invites us to ask after matters that may be occluded by such a focus. She encourages us to consider, for example, how a narrative of immigration is (also) a narrative of capitalism; or how the processes of community formation may be thought cospatially with indigenous dispossession.

What I'm suggesting is that Yamashita produces a constellation that illuminates the compresence – the interrelated simultaneity – rather than discreteness of places, objects, and histories ordinarily thought distinct. By doing so, her work troubles the conventional organization of bodies of knowledge within the academy. Thus, Brazil's modernization as marked by the establishment of the Federal Republic of Brazil in 1889 becomes the purview of Asian American studies, for it was a condition catalyzing Japanese migration to Brazil, as does the ecological impact of the transformation of natural phenomena into raw materials for capitalism, as is one of the thematic interests

of *Through the Arc of the Rainforest*. Asian Americanists neither can remain focused on the United States nor lose sight of it altogether. Rather, we are invited to orientate ourselves to the constellations as our objects of study. This point is underscored by *Tropic of Orange*, which literalizes the reshaping of the world by global capitalism and the ongoing legacies of imperialism and colonialism in the fantastic conceit Yamashita employs.¹³ Her work in this way enjoins us to ask: What role does the geographic imagination play in making certain formations appear naturally or properly the object of Asian Americanist inquiry? What new insights may emerge by embracing a more unruly relationship to geographic propriety?

On the Complex Architecture of Asian American Literary Time

In inviting her readers into this undisciplined geographic imagination, Yamashita also occasions consideration of the temporal protocols that organize Asian American literary studies. Amply evident in the spatial orientation Yamashita brings to bear, which prompts attention to the emergence of western European enlightenment, for example, or to precapitalist and precolonial time by her address of planetary ecology and her use of fabulous, “untimely” figures like Archangel in *Tropic of Orange*, nowhere is her interest in time more pronounced than in *I Hotel*.¹⁴ Ten novellas constitute *I Hotel*, each dedicated to a year in a decade beginning with 1968. Locating itself thus to the era in which the social movements of the 1950s and 1960s precipitated the entry of ethnic studies into U.S. universities, and organized by the architecture, history, and ethos of the International Hotel in San Francisco, the novel structurally reflects the thickness of time that correlates with an expansive spatial imagination.

The title of each novella gives a sense of the simultaneous continuity and change that characterizes the idea of a hotel:

- 1968: Eye Hotel
- 1969: I Spy Hotel
- 1970: “I” Hotel
- 1971: Aiiieeeee! Hotel
- 1972: Inter-national Hotel
- 1973: Int’l Hotel
- 1974: I-Migrant Hotel
- 1975: Internationale Hotel
- 1976: Ai Hotel
- 1977: I-Hotel

The play on “I” calls attention to the shifting terrain of Asian American studies, by invoking multiple threads of Asian American studies’ critical preoccupations, from the definition of “Asian American” (“I”) to racial optics (“eye”) and immigration histories, as well as the literary qualities of “Asian America” and its international geopolitical underpinnings. The method of titling by year has the further effect of implying a certain continuity of what comes before (1968) and after (1977). It evokes in this way an indefinite temporal parameter as the frame for capturing what happens in this particular decade.

The hotel has long been a landmark in San Francisco. Reconstructed after the fires that decimated the city following the 1906 earthquake, the International Hotel was, as Yamashita’s novel posits, a locus for Asian American activists and migrant workers until its demolition in 1981. By beginning with 1968, Yamashita acknowledges the familiar narrative of the establishment of Asian American studies amid the racialized social unrest exemplified by the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and by the Vietnam War and the widespread protests against it. We are reminded by her accounts of this decade of the alliances among Asian American activists, the Black Panthers, community organizers, and the American Indian movement that were necessary to contest the eviction of the migrant laborers who had long taken up residence in the hotel. And in an echo of the scene staged between Buzzworm and Emi, in this novella we are reminded of the sometimes uneasy nature of those alliances and the impossibility of neutralizing personalities to create permanent solidarities, either between or within these groups.

What we also get is an awareness of the richness of aesthetic production both during and reflecting on this era: the novel offers comics and other images, unfolds through a variety of media and styles – narrative prose, dialogue, drama, screenplay, music, and choreography – and makes us aware in that way of the impossibility of telling this story, these stories, through a singular medium. As Yamashita notes in the afterword of the novel, “I found my research [for this project] was scattered, scattered across political affinities, ethnicities, artistic pursuits – difficult to coalesce into any one storyline or historic chronology. The people I spoke with had definitely been in the movement, but often times had no idea what others had been doing . . . but everyone was there, really *there*. . . . Multiple novellas allowed me to tell parallel stories, to experiment with various resonant narrative voices, and to honor the complex architecture of a time, a movement, a hotel, and its people” (610). Formal variation follows from the effort to aestheticize this history and its players and places. Like hotel residents who are simultaneously connected and

atomized, the apprehension of this time requires acknowledgment of multiple temporalities, formally represented by the different relations to time correlating with the difference between image and narrative, dance, and speech. Allowing for compresence without requiring incorporation into a singular narrative, Yamashita formally and organizationally produces the experience of time that is thick, dense, and immersive. While unavailable to those living this history – those who were “really *there*” – this experience, this thick time, is given as necessary to contemporary knowledge production.

That *I Hotel* addresses itself to the politics and practices of Asian American literary studies is made pointedly clear in the novella “1971: Aiiieeeee! Hotel,” which invokes the *Aiiieeeee!* collection that is one of the foundational texts of the field. Coedited by Jeffrey Paul Chang, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong, and famously (or notoriously) featuring a polemical introduction by Frank Chin that decries stereotypical images as “fake” representations of Asians, and as similarly inauthentic those of Asian descent who circulate the image of the emasculated Asian man, *Aiiieeeee!* takes its title from the scream that pervasively accompanies the stereotype of the Asian martial artist. The privileging of and fidelity to that image of Asian hypermasculinity as the expression of the “real” Asian (man) that came to be associated with the cultural nationalism of the *Aiiieeeee!* project is ironically restaged in this novella. “Drag pastiche” is given to us as one of the key terms of this section; indeed, the novella opens with a cartoon image of a hirsute, overdeveloped, axe-wielding shirtless man positioned in front of an attentive Asian American audience. Mocking the fetishization of this kind of masculinity and the search for and manufacturing of heroes that embody those qualities, “1971” emphasizes the performativity of Asian American subjectivity even as it acknowledges the materiality of the racism that gives rise to and is perpetuated by the belittling stereotypes of “the Chinaman” or “the Jap.” There is no originary core, no foundational ontology, that grounds racialized subjectivity. Instead, there is, according to Yamashita, subjects fabricated by the technologies of nation and empire. Or, in other words, Asian American identity begins and unfolds in spaces and times far removed from any individual subject. Only the kind of transectional perspective that Yamashita provides in *I Hotel* can apprehend and critically mobilize the depth and breadth of the social totality within which the Asian American as a subject appears.¹⁵

When does Asian America begin, and what is or will be its end, its ends? As Yamashita evokes such questions, her work posits the fictionality of Asian American subjectivity. This is not to say that she disavows or negates the histories of racism that produced “Orientals” and “Japs” and “Chinamen,” but

rather that *I Hotel* cautions against the substitution of those “fake” terms by their simple reverse. By underscoring the material conditions that give rise to the need for the articulation of subjectivities alternative to those “fakes,” she simultaneously emphasizes the role of time in the social construction of Asian Americanness. *I Hotel* opens with an invocation of chronological time as real time: “So I’m Walter Cronkite, dig? And it’s February 27, 1968, and I’m saying, *the U.S. is mired in a stalemate in Vietnam, and you are there*” (1). Immediately, however, that reality is displaced by another: “But whoa, let’s back up twenty-nine days to the Lunar New Year” (1). It is the date on which the father of the central character of this novella, Paul, dies. That death, coupled with the rising death counts of Vietnamese and Americans in the war, marks the beginnings of Asian American subjectivity according to this novel.

Such a demarcation strikingly evacuates the possibility of celebrating Asian American subjectivity. What we are left with are the circumstances of life and death – in theoretical terms, the bio- and necro-politics that distribute life and death differentially – as thematic emphasis. Individual lives are embedded in history, Yamashita reminds us – a history that unfolds in multiple scales and registers. *I Hotel*’s opening identifies the shifting temporal grounds – the changing frames of reference and corollary values indicated by the shift from the Gregorian to the lunar calendar – upon and through which Asian American subjects form. Invoking the histories of U.S. imperial presence abroad by reference to Vietnam, and coupling that invocation with the death of the patriarchal father, these first pages of *I Hotel* invert the usual association of the beginnings of identity in birth by locating it instead in death. In this way, Yamashita announces the futility of the search for the “real,” an original available for faithful replication. This futility plays out in what she portrays as the comic (literally, comic images constitute a large portion of “1971”) – or rather, the tragicomedy of suffering, violence, and irony characterizing the formation of Asian American subjectivities. There is no originary Asian American, no naturally emergent individual who can be identified as the forefather of Asian America. The temporality underlying the relationship between the “real” and the “fake” is displaced in *I Hotel* by unexpected consequences, reversals and repetitions, and the need to reach ever further into the infinite expanses of space and time, to apprehend what it means to live in a world in which the Asian American subject takes form.

I Hotel in this way recasts the emergence and institutionalization of Asian American studies and Asian American literatures from a story about progress in the effort to redress structural inequality, to one that asks us to consider how the contemporary era is constituted – by the waging of what wars, on the

backs of whose lives – and how it will be remembered. In this sense, Yamashita suggests that the answer to the question of when Asian America begins may lie in our conception of the future. Rather than suggesting the proper telos for Asian American history, literary or otherwise, her work asks for critical engagement with propriety – to actively bring to bear the subjects and objects of inquiry unfamiliar and defamiliarizing to conventional practices of knowledge production.

Literary Worlds

I would suggest that Yamashita sees the role of the artist, the writer, as precisely one who can bring to bear alternative sensibilities like those I have tried to describe in this chapter. Such a suggestion is supported in part by the very fact of what her writing accomplishes, namely, the thickening of the horizon of knowledge to something less like a horizon and more like the experience of the submariner in the borderlessness of the deep sea. It is also more explicitly apparent in the *Tropic of Orange*, which features Manzanar Murakami, a character who conducts self-composed symphonic overtures from his perch on a Los Angeles freeway overpass. A striking figure with a “lion’s head of white hair flailing this way and that, the silver glint of the baton or a figure of strange command outlined starkly between skyscrapers in the afternoon sunlight,” Manzanar may yet go unnoticed by those in the vehicles moving below him (35). Named to remember the internment camps, Manzanar was once an accomplished surgeon who one day left that life behind, and whose genius rests in his ability to perceive and craft into art the interconnectedness of all that has passed and is present: “*There are maps and there are maps and there are maps*. The uncanny thing was that he could see all of them at once, filter some, pick them out like transparent windows and place them ever delicately and consecutively in a complex grid of pattern, spatial discernment, body politic. Although one might have thought this capacity to see was different from a musical one, it was really one and the same. For each of the maps was a layer of music, a clef, an instrument, a musical instruction, a change of measure, a coda” (57).

While Manzanar is surely not a direct self-representation of the author, the qualities ascribed to his aesthetic genius are amply evident across Yamashita’s writings. Her attunement to the natural world finds voice in the fact that the maps with which Manzanar composes begin “with the very geology of the land, the artesian rivers running beneath the surface, connected and divergent, shifting and swelling” and the “complex and normally silent web of

faults – cracking mud flats baking under a desert sun” (57). And they include as well “the man-made grid of civil utilities [below the surface]: Southern California pipelines of natural gas; the unnatural waterways of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, and the great dank tunnels of sewage; the cascades of poisonous effluents surging from rain-washed streets into the Santa Monica Bay,” and even the “electric currents racing voltage into . . . millions of hungry energy-efficient appliances; telephone cables, cable TV, fiber optics, computer networks” (57). Like Manzanar, Yamashita finds in everyday life the impact of historical forces that result in the seeming unremarkability of the vastness and complexity of transportation and communication technologies; of the intricate urban planning required for both sewage (below) and traffic (above) to move with ease; and of the conditions that produce and perhaps even necessitate the ordinariness of homelessness as a facet of late capitalist society.

In this way, even as Yamashita helps us to conceptualize Asian American literary history as an index of the material world, she does not fail to attend to the literary side of Asian American literature. In sharp contrast to commonplace understandings of aesthetics as delinked from politics or questions of material equality, Yamashita’s work exemplifies the worldliness of aesthetics.

Notes

- 1 Frances Tran provided invaluable research assistance on this essay. My thanks to Min Hyoung Song and Rajini Srikanth for patient and generative engagement with the development of this piece.
- 2 For a keystone study of the tropes that reflect and articulate the social and political history of Asian America, see Elaine Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984). See also Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), for insights into the labor and state policies that precipitate migration from Asia to the United States and their relation to the expressive cultural practices of Asian Americans.
- 3 Yamashita is also a dramatist whose work has been produced by East West Players, a long-standing Asian American theater group. While it is beyond the purview of this present essay to consider fully, the collection of her dramatic writing published as *Anime Wong: Fictions of Performance*, ed. Stephen Hong Song (Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press, 2014) shares some of the thematic and formal qualities that characterize her prose writing.
- 4 Fernand Braudel, *On History*, trans. Sarah Matthews (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982). Braudel’s work calls on historians to shift emphasis from the study of events to the study of persistent structures that underwrite history. See also Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origin of Our Times*, 2nd ed.

- (London: Verso, 2010) and Lisa Lowe, "The Intimacies of Four Continents," in *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 191–212.
- 5 Rachel C. Lee, *The Americas of Asian American Literature: Gendered Fictions of Nation and Transnation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), see esp. ch. 4; Caroline Rody, "The Transnational Imagination: Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*," in *Asian North American Identities*, ed. Eleanor Ty and Donald C. Goellnicht (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 130–48. I have used Yamashita's writings as grounds for thinking through the possibilities of a hemispheric model of Asian American literary studies in an earlier essay, work from which I draw for present purposes. See Kandice Chuh, "Of Hemispheres and Other Spheres: Navigating Karen Tei Yamashita's Literary Worlds," *American Literary History* 18.3 (2006): 618–37.
 - 6 See, e.g., Mark Chiang, "Capitalizing Form: The Globalization of the Literary Field: A Response to David Palumbo-Liu," *American Literary History* 20.4 (Winter 2008): 836–44; Min Hyoung Song, "Becoming Planetary," *American Literary History* 23.3 (2011): 555–73; David Palumbo-Liu, "The Occupation of Form: (Re)theorizing Literary History," *American Literary History* 20.4 (2008): 814–35. On spatialization in *Tropic of Orange*, see Sue-Im Lee, "'We Are Not the World': Global Village, Universalism, and Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 53.3 (2007): 501–27; Sarah D. Wald, "'Refusing to Halt': Mobility and the Quest for Spatial Justice in Helena Maria Viramontes's *Their Dogs Came with Them* and Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*," *Western American Literature* 48.1–2 (Spring and Summer 2013): 70–89; and Molly Wallace, "Tropics of Globalization: Reading the New North America," *symplekx* 9.1–2 (2011): 145–60.
 - 7 Karen Tei Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange* (Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press, 1997). Further references in parentheses in the text.
 - 8 Karen Tei Yamashita, *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* (Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press, 1990). Further references in parentheses in the text.
 - 9 Karen Tei Yamashita, *Brazil-Marú* (Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press, 1993). Further references in parentheses in the text.
 - 10 See Elizabeth Espadas, "Destination Brazil: Immigration in Works of Nélida Piñón and Karen Tei Yamashita," *MACLAS Latin American Essay* 12 (1998): 51–61, for a reading of *Brazil-Marú* from a sociohistorical perspective.
 - 11 Karen Tei Yamashita, *Circle K Cycles* (Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press, 2001), 11. Further references in parentheses in the text. Tanya Kam offers a reading of *Circle K Cycles* that emphasizes migration and movement in this work. See Tanya Kam, "Traveling Identities: Between Worlds in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Circle K Cycles*," *ellipsis: Journal of the American Portuguese Studies Association* 6 (2008): 9–32.
 - 12 See Shu-ching Chen, "Magic Capitalism and Melodramatic Imagination – Producing Locality and Reconstructing Asian Ethnicity in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rainforest*," *Euramerica* 34.4 (December 2004): 587–625, for further discussion on this matter.
 - 13 On spatialization in *Tropic of Orange*, see Sue-Im Lee, "'We Are Not the World': Global Village, Universalism, and Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 53.3 (Fall 2007): 501–27; Sarah D. Wald, "'Refusing to Halt': Mobility and the Quest for Spatial Justice in Helena Maria Viramontes's *Their Dogs Came with Them* and

Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*," *Western American Literature* 48.1–2 (Spring and Summer 2013): 70–89; and Molly Wallace, "Tropics of Globalization: Reading the New North America," *symploke* 9.1–2 (2011): 145–60.

- 14 Karen Tei Yamashita, *I-Hotel* (Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press, 2010). Further references in parentheses in the text.
- 15 "Social totality" here refers to the Marxist idea of the complexity of, in Stuart Hall's terms, the "ensemble of social relations." The relationships among different registers of society – the economic, the political, the cultural, and so on – are complexly articulated with and through each other. Stuart Hall, "Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Post-Structuralist Debates," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 2.2 (1985): 91–114, see p. 91.

Asian American New Media as Literature for the Digital Age

KONRAD NG

Asian Americans are using social media platforms to compose literatures of activism and resistance. In doing so, they are circumventing barriers that have challenged Asian American representation and empowerment in order to develop novel forms of cultural capital. New media scholar Henry Jenkins (2006) characterizes the digital age as a moment of “convergence culture,” where “old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways.”¹ Technology has reshaped the media landscape as well as a range of cultural, political, and economic relationships. The “old media” world of analog media – print and broadcast film, radio, and television – where content was owned and controlled by a single media conglomerate and segregated by media platforms is giving way to grassroots collaboration, interactivity, participation, and networking in the production and consumption of cultural material. Digital technology is seeding new forms of cultural access and creative expression across communication platforms, fostering both strategic and tactical alignments between old media industries and new media values.

Surveying this changing landscape, this chapter addresses the following questions: How may we consider the possibilities of digital activities as literature? How may we understand the cultural labor of Asian American new media content? Central to the argument that this chapter makes is the issue of race, as it is created and reimagined in new media formats. Lisa Nakamura and Peter Chow-White’s collection *Race after the Internet* (2012) offers a compelling discussion of the ways in which race is not an afterthought of technology, but is an integral aspect of it and formed within its workings. In their introduction to the coedited volume, Nakamura and Chow-White credit African American scholar Henry Louis Gates with a novel way of mobilizing new technologies to feature race. His genealogy project, wherein he traces the genetic ancestry of celebrated African Americans, was made possible by the science of

genetic testing. The revelations of the celebrities' ancestry occurred within the context of the "reality television format."² Nakamura and Chow-White note that Gates saw these on-screen revelations as crucial interventions in the nation's history about race: "slaves were uniquely deprived of information about their backgrounds and histories. African American slaves were rendered non-human . . . with the technique of historical erasure as part of the techné of racism."³ They explain the digital nature of Gates's genealogy project:

the use of bioinformatic technologies such as gene sequencing to tell individuals the "truth" about race, and the program ["African American Lives"] itself is produced as a digital signal, as is much of the audiovisual content in circulation today . . . Gates' videos can be viewed on YouTube.com as well as PBS.org, where they are discussed with great seriousness (as well as great flippancy. . .) by users and viewers.⁴

These online conversations about race, stimulated by online content, reshape the offline understanding of racial dynamics and racial history. Asian Americans' use of digital media takes full advantage of the power afforded by the online stage.

Asian Americans are using new media in ways that suggest a level of complexity and strategic intent rooted in a desire to shape the representation of Asian America. The broad access afforded by new media has not only led to increased participation in cultural industries, but has also contributed to the politicization of its users; new media activities are opportunities for raw and spirited grassroots cultural production that may be sharpened with activist ambitions. YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, blogs, and the host of other media applications still in development have created unique opportunities for shaping cultural consciousness not found in mainstream print, film, and television. In this moment of opportunity, Asian Americans appear poised to shape the contours of the digital age in novel ways. The Asian American population is noted for being an extensively wired community and participating in America's culture and technology economy as a so-called Asian American creative class.⁵

The significance of Asian American digital life on social media and networking sites, however, extends beyond the capacity of Asian Americans to access new media. What is noteworthy is the kind of participation being exercised by Asian Americans and on behalf of Asian America. Digital technology is more than a platform of increased communication; it is an opportunity for social and political intervention. In the field of communication technologies, Asian Americans have been traditionally underrepresented across the analog

spectrum of print, film, and television, or have been obscured by stereotypes that range from seemingly harmless to blatantly racist. In the digital age, Asian Americans have opportunities to compose counternarratives about race, identity, and the Asian American experience; Asian American digital media, then, is a literature of activism and social justice. While these themes follow the history of Asian American cultural activism rooted in the revolutionary times of the late 1960s, a moment when cultural mediums like art, film, television, music, theater, and literature were opportunities for critique and empowerment, the dynamics of convergence culture and the role of design and interface in cultural consumption and production mark new media as a unique and combustible literature of engagement. While the formation of racial experience has been primarily understood as an offline experience, Lisa Nakamura (2008) notes the importance of recognizing digital racial formation. In spite of beliefs that the Internet is an apolitical medium predicated on access, racial experience is shaped by digital technology. Online representations of race may be shaped by offline culture, but elements such as web design and the interfaces of mobile devices, computer screens, terminals, and the like introduce new dynamics in the formation of racial discourse. In the new media world, users of color have opportunities to impact identity development broadly, creating and critiquing racial meanings, and sharing these racial understandings with communities of color around the world – with immediacy, intimacy, and novelty. Because Asian Americans have been underrepresented or misrepresented across public institutions and industries of culture, the search for Asian American cultural agency and representations has nurtured alternate spaces for expression. Asian Americans are creating digital cultures and coalitions that carry activist force and authorship in understanding the Asian American experience. These grassroots new media cultures are forming a compelling digital Asian American literary canon: online expressions that capture Asian American life and culture in ways that shape the national conversation about race, repositioning race discourse as a digital one. Indeed, this is the advent of “born-digital” literature – creative content that is being produced using new media technologies that are participatory, convergent, interactive, collaborative and networked, and consumed through online forums – and marks the digital turn in Asian American literary history. Asian America literature is being composed through Tweets, Tumblr, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and other platforms. The activities of Asian American digital life are literatures of creativity and resistance, of activism and social justice, taking advantage of a cultural ethos where content may be freely contested and shaped at the grassroots level.

To understand this changing and dynamic creative moment in Asian American literary history, it is useful to give an overview of a range of Asian American new media literary forms and practices composing contemporary Asian American online life. First, consider how Asian American blogs and e-mail campaigns engage Asian Americans into offline activism. Rather than see blogs as a personal journals and e-mail as a neutral tool of communication, the activities of Asian American bloggers like Phil Yu and Asian American filmmakers like Justin Lin illustrate how new media writing is a form of activist literature. Yu's long-running blog *Angry Asian Man*, and Lin's e-mail campaign to rally support for his groundbreaking film *Better Luck Tomorrow* reveal how online community engagement through blogs and e-mail can have offline effects. Second is the transformation of the microblog and social networking platform of Twitter into a tool of creative activism and site of Asian American cultural criticism. Instead of accepting the 140-character limit to writing posts ("Tweets") as a handicap to communication and Twitter profiles as static biographies, Asian Americans have joined movements to transform the microblog into a point of departure for cultural crusades and critical self-reflection. This was especially the case after comedian Stephen Colbert aired a sketch about Asian Americans on his show *The Colbert Report* in response to controversy over the name of the National Football League's football team, the *Washington Redskins* (see the following text, for a fuller treatment of this instance of Twitter activism). Finally, convergence culture has allowed for grassroots participation in the writing of history and the publication of historical narrative. Online crowd-sourced encyclopedic sites like Wikipedia have shifted expectations of who may possess authority over historical knowledge. Traditional venues for exhibiting history such as museums, print, and television media have been eclipsed by a multitude of alternatives with broader accessibility, immediacy, and activist intent. Initiatives to edit, improve, or intervene tactically in Asian American content on Wikipedia, and unconventional sites for historical objects like eBay, the crowd-source public auction and seller/buyer forum, have generated an Asian American narrative that was often lost in "old media" platforms. Asian American online life as expressed through blogs, e-mail, Twitter, and Wikipedia suggest how digital technologies are platforms of racial meaning. As such, Asian American digital life can be seen as a born-digital literature with offline effects, propelling action and reaction, and the rethinking of the Asian American experience.

Blogs and E-mail

Originally started as a personal diary in 2001 by Phil Yu, an American of Korean descent, *Angry Asian Man* has become the preeminent blog aggregating a broad range of topics and news events about the Asian American experience. The blog posts articles, images, interviews, profiles, videos, and links to events about Asians and Asian Americans in American culture, touching on accolades and incidents of racism. Each post is sometimes accompanied by brief, critical, and often irreverent commentary by Yu about the item's relationship to understanding Asian America. Yu's commitment to blogging about Asian Americans in popular culture stemmed from his undergraduate and graduate education in Asian American studies and cinema studies, and his childhood recognition that Asian American representation in film and television was imperfect and mired in damaging stereotypes. After finishing his undergraduate degree, Yu returned to California and created a personal website on a free hosting service to continue the critical dialogues characteristic of his undergraduate experience. Yu posted news items that showcased a wide range of Asian American experiences on race, racism, and culture that Yu believes is overlooked by mainstream media outlets and platforms and lost in the predominantly black-white racial discourse in the United States. Yu created the moniker "Angry Asian Man" as a subdomain of his website to express his thoughts on the Asian American experience. Being "Angry Asian Man" was meant to be ironic, chosen to serve as a counterpoint to the stereotype of Asian Americans as being passive and indifferent as well as a contrast to his own self-described levelheaded temperament. Initially, Yu remained an anonymous contributor to his blog, identified by the title of the site, its logo – the *G.I. Joe* character *Quick Kick* – and the statements "That's racist!" or "Stay Angry," Yu's playful catchphrase bringing attention to the racialized dimensions of being Asian in America.

In sum, Yu was writing for a specific audience – the Asian American community – using his repurposed news items and brief commentary to spur critique and Asian American action in the offline world. In 2002, *Angry Asian Man* attracted greater attention as a result of his protest of Abercrombie & Fitch when the clothing company produced T-shirts featuring insensitive and offensive Asian American stereotypes. *Angry Asian Man* became the rallying point for community protests against Abercrombie & Fitch, causing the business to pull the T-shirts from its stores. The increased attention to the site prompted Yu to spin *Angry Asian Man* into its own website – angryasianman.com – so as

to create a public persona and forum that would be separate from Yu's personal life and work. Since then, Angry Asian Man has become the longest-running Asian American blog and its confrontation of stereotypes and commitment to empowering Asian American community through self-awareness has been a potent form of activism in the digital age.

A similar trajectory of new media literature as activism can be found in the career of Justin Lin and the promotion through blogs and e-mail of his debut feature film, *Better Luck Tomorrow* (2002), as a transformative moment in Asian American cultural history. The characters and plot of *Better Luck Tomorrow* provide a critique of the prevailing stereotype of Asian Americans as the model minority; this critique was a rallying point for Asian Americans, but it was the digital age convergence of the roles of cultural producer and consumer and its "do-it-yourself" literary tactics that resulted in Lin and his film's achieving a visibility that went far beyond "breaking out" as most independent filmmakers aspire to do; much like Angry Asian Man mobilized Asian Americans around community issues, Justin Lin and *Better Luck Tomorrow* established a digital infrastructure for community organizing.

Better Luck Tomorrow was a stylized film about a group of suburban Asian American high school students who use their status as overachievers to enable their illicit activities. The film premiered at the 2002 Sundance Film Festival to critical acclaim, which led to a distribution deal with MTV Films (a subsidiary of Paramount Pictures). Although *Better Luck Tomorrow* received studio distribution, the film's distribution budget, a crucial ingredient in a film's box office success, was small. Without studio support, the film needed support from the community to demonstrate the commercial viability of Asian American cinema and the market impact of Asian Americans. The cast and crew of the film and Asian American media organizations started a grassroots e-mail campaign to supplement the promotion of the film provided by the film's website. Their participation went beyond self-promotion; they linked support of the film with investing in future opportunities for Asian American actors, crew, and film projects in an unfriendly industry.

In an article published in the *Los Angeles Times*, lead actor Parry Shen stated that more than box office success was at stake: "If we fall short, it's going to be a shame. . . . It's going to be a long, long time before we get a chance like this again."⁶ David Magdael, codirector of the Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival, used the Asian Pacific American (APA) First Weekend Film Club to encourage Asian American support of the film.⁷ The APA First Weekend Film Club was an e-mail distribution list modeled after underground marketing

campaigns for African American films in the late 1990s. “At the end of the day, all they’re paying attention to in Hollywood is green,” Magdael stated in an article published in *Entertainment Weekly*, “[i]t’s not black, it’s not white, it’s not yellow, it’s green. [So] you have to understand that for the Asian-American community, this is history.”⁸ The film’s website began to equip e-mail recipients with media tools to further promote and support the film. The *Better Luck Tomorrow* website sold merchandise, listed screening dates, press clippings, and other media items for use by supporters. The promotional campaign also celebrated “superfans” as models of robust support for the film. On its opening weekend, *Better Luck Tomorrow* “bested MTV’s historical per screen benchmark [and] . . . led the weekend box office on a per screen basis.”⁹ The grassroots mass e-mail campaign and online tactics behind *Better Luck Tomorrow* reflect the kind of savvy marketing techniques that are available in the digital age, but it is the perceived imperative to organize the community that is unique to these efforts; the Asian American community was asked to demonstrate its box office power and organizational capacity in order to improve Asian American opportunities in entertainment as well as the community’s social standing.

Justin Lin and his team used the same digital strategy and tactics of blogs and e-mails to promote his next Asian American film, *Finishing the Game*, a mockumentary about casting the next Bruce Lee. Similar to *Angry Asian Man*, the blog posts were personal and often irreverent, but a narrative thread emerged: a grassroots critical engagement of Asian American politics, culture, and community, and the use of personal experience to organize the community. One exemplary blog post by Lin recounts a conversation with a veteran Asian American film producer who characterized filmmakers who make Asian American films as “retarded.” Lin’s reply is rooted in his experience in the film industry and outlines the ethical imperatives that have informed his films: to introduce a range of multidimensional Asian American characters and show how Asian America is a source of American cinema and a commercially influential audience.¹⁰ The blogs and e-mail tactics to create online campaigns to rally around *Better Luck Tomorrow* and *Angry Asian Man* may be born-digital forms of literature, but have offline activist impacts. While the goal of these literary tactics may have been to promote or protest Asian American cultural objects, they are examples of how digital age literature is generative from attempts to seize the narratives of the Internet, as efforts to mobilize voices that articulate a story that Asian Americans want to hear, and to push back against stories that present reductive representations of the Asian American experience.

Asian American Twitter Activism

In April 2014, @ColbertReport, the Twitter handle for the Comedy Central's satirical show *The Colbert Report* featuring comedian, Stephen Colbert, posted a controversial tweet, "I am willing to show #Asian community I care by introducing the Ching-Chong Ding-Dong Foundation for Sensitivity to Orientals or Whatever." Lacking in apparent context, at best, the tweet from a well-known satiric comedy show was decidedly unfunny. At worst, the tweet was interpreted as racist and offensive in boldly referencing denigrating and tired stereotypes about Asian Americans. It later turned out that the tweet was in reference to a sketch by Colbert, who had attempted to illustrate the absurdity of the National Football League's Washington Redskins team owner's response to demands that his team's name be changed. In an attempt to placate frustrated activists, Dan Snyder proposed the creation of a community foundation for Native Americans that was worth a small fraction of the total value of his professional football team. The conceit of *The Colbert Report*, then, involved Colbert mockingly creating a foundation for Asian Americans named after Asian American racial phrases. Suey Park (@suey_park), an Asian American activist who believed in the power of Twitter to mobilize offline action, found the tweet offensive. Through her Twitter handle, Park called for the cancellation of *The Colbert Report*, asking Twitter users to trend the hashtag #CancelColbert by tweeting their protest to @ColbertReport, and tagging their replies with the hashtag. What followed was an intense Twitter exchange that was soon covered by the mainstream news media, exposing the Asian American experience to a wider audience.¹¹ Suey Park's use of the hashtag as a form of cultural protest and opportunity to bring public attention to Asian American issues came earlier when Park worked with other Asian American activists, Juliet Shen (@Juliet_Shen), and the social media activist collective 18 Million Rising (@18MillionRising) to trend the marginalization of Asian American women in racial discourse with their #NotYourAsianSideKick Twitter campaign. Each believed that technology and social media could be leveraged to promote civic engagement and civil rights. #NotYourAsianSidekick was a topic that trended for several days, garnering attention from blogs and mainstream news outlets and positioning Park, Shen and 18 Million Rising as Twitter's Asian American activists.¹²

With *The Colbert Report*, Park was acting alone, and the target of her activism was a highly regarded figure in progressive politics. Over the course of

several Tweets, Park wrote that Asian Americans were often easy targets, seen as passive and perpetually underestimated, and while some argued that *The Colbert Report* was parody Park replied that the humor was enabled by white male privilege, a position that afforded security to determine what was permissible at the expense of indigenous people, communities of color, and women. Park's hashtag activism Twitter writings to #CancelColbert caused disagreement within the Asian American Twitter activist community. Park and her supporters were attacked, discredited, and dismissed on blogs, Facebook, and Twitter by defenders of Colbert. The claim was that Park missed the satire, but the vitriol emanating from supporters and detractors illustrated how sexism and misogyny were also at work against Park and her identity as an Asian American woman. Park made this point by changing her race and gender using elements of her Twitter profile. Park changed her name, picture, and biography to become an Asian male, a white male, and other identities to shift the tactics of her position and the terms of debate. Each new Twitter avatar would reveal how the politics of race and gender – especially Asian American subjectivities – would elicit different reactions in the debate. Over the course of the exchanges regarding #CancelColbert, Park also encouraged her Twitter followers to swarm her detractors on Twitter to draw hardened positions around the issues; an ideological middle ground on #CancelColbert, Suey Park, and Asian America eroded on Twitter. The Asian American protest of *The Colbert Show* intensified over the course of several days becoming a top trend in Twitter; the movement made the news cycle of major outlets and elicited a direct response by Stephen Colbert.¹³

Writing in *The New Yorker* about the #CancelColbert phenomenon, Jay Caspian Kang spotlights the importance of twitter activism: “If an activist hashtag becomes a trend, has a broad, important conversation taken place? It is no simple thing to determine whether Twitter outrage can itself expand the terms of discourse and challenge the status quo.” In a thoughtful meditation on his conflicted feelings, as a Korean American, about the controversy generated by #CancelColbert, Kang acknowledges that Suey Park sparked a necessary conversation about the soft racism frequently engaged in by white liberals and forced a reckoning of the Asian American perspective in the “familiar binaries” of racial discourse in the United States. He writes,

I also found myself agreeing with what Park has to say about the roles we, as Asian-Americans, are called to play in America's ongoing diversity drama.

Unlike Park, I tend to keep my political beliefs close to the vest, especially when talking to white liberal friends, because I assume – fairly or not – that they expect me to laugh at whatever gets mocked on “The Daily Show” or satirized on “The Colbert Report.” Like Park, I have seen how quickly a presumed collegiality can turn into a mocking, almost threatening, tone whenever I stray from the assumed consensus that we all hate “worse racists,” Fox News, and gun nuts. Like Park, I have always assumed – again, fairly or not – that white liberals believe that as a person of color, I owe a debt of gratitude to the generations of well-intentioned white people who have fought hard for my right to write for prestigious publications.¹⁴

The #CancelColbert episode in Asian American activism was significant as a born-digital phenomenon with offline effects. While *The Colbert Show* was not canceled, the literature of Asian American Twitter activism broke a threshold of visibility; it impacted the popular understanding of Asian American identity. Instead of Twitter being a simple microblog for daily musings and the sharing of information, or the 140-character limit to Twitter posts as a barrier or handicap to meaningful writings, or Twitter profiles as static avatars, Twitter became an opportunity to set terms of debate regarding Asian American identity and empowerment across media platforms, from Twitter to television and print media. Twitter’s short-form writing built vigorous coalitions and positions, demonstrating how born-digital writing could have offline effects. While Twitter had played a similar role in serving as a network and tool of mobilization and reporting during the revolutionary demonstrations of the Arab Spring in the Arab world in December 2010¹⁵ and the class protests of the Occupy Wall Street movement in September 2011,¹⁶ #CancelColbert and #NotYourAsianSidekick used online writing to increase visibility and shape the cultural understanding of Asian Americans in the world of new and old media.

Asian America on Wikipedia and eBay

The novelty of digital age literature is expanding the sites for Asian American cultural intervention. As “old media” sites for cultural representation and knowledge – lacking in Asian American content – are eclipsed by new media platforms, Asian Americans are writing online narratives in these new spaces to populate the cultural void with intent. While critical race studies often focus on broadening access to media and the quantity and quality of representations, the immediacy and participatory nature of convergence culture changes the calculus for what stands as authoritative knowledge; YouTube,

blogs, and Wikipedia now hold as much intellectual capital as film, television, libraries, and museums. Born-digital phenomena are shaping our understanding of historical, cultural, and artistic events. New media's potency for intervention opens possibilities for Asian American literature during the digital age.

How might we rethink the role of national museums during a moment when Wikipedia has become a common source for knowledge? The free-access, free content, open-edit online encyclopedia of Wikipedia is serving as a museum and library of the digital age, and the unique structure of the platform is that knowledge is verified using online links and best practices as developed by Wikipedia's community of writers and editors. In this sense, writing on Wikipedia is a born-digital activity – its cultural genesis is entirely online. A priority of Smithsonian Institution's Asian Pacific American Center has been to rethink the role of a "national museum" during an era when building museums and collections around cultural specific experiences faces opposition,¹⁷ and when sites for knowledge are going digital. Rather than assume that the national narration must be embodied in a museum per se, the tactic has been to focus on digital age knowledge; online sites such as Wikipedia hold as much narrative force as objects housed in a museum. To this end, the office tasked with seeding the Asian American experience across the Smithsonian Institution – the world's largest museum and research complex responsible for the increase and diffusion of knowledge and the preservation of the American patrimony – is taking to populating the online sources for knowledge with Asian American historical, cultural, and artistic narratives. The center has organized and coordinated Wikipedia "edit-a-thons." These day-long events teach volunteers to write and edit encyclopedic entries on Wikipedia relating to Asian America history, art, and culture as ways to enrich Asian American knowledge and write narratives that are generally absent or unknown across institutions and industries of popular and national culture. Participants identified a list of articles and topics deemed critical to understanding Asian America, and proceeded to review and develop entries with more online content.

Wikipedia may also be a site of creative contestation as evidenced by the activism of Save Our Schools Hawaii, a grassroots multiracial group of parents and students protesting mandatory "Friday Furloughs" of Hawaii's public school teachers adopted by then Governor Linda Lingle in 2010. Using SOS808 as its Twitter handle and hashtag, the group staged a sit-in in the Office of the Governor to discuss the state of public education in the majority Asian American state that ranked low in national educational achievements. With the furloughs, Hawai'i would continue to have the shortest public school year

in the nation.¹⁸ The sit-in ended eight days later in arrests and trespassing citations. However, the group's impact was not measured by its civil disobedience, but by its digital disobedience. During their occupation of Governor Lingle's office, SOS808 pushed their cause through a wide spectrum of digital media networks at their disposal – a since-closed website,¹⁹ Twitter,²⁰ Facebook,²¹ and YouTube²² – and attracted sympathizers who engaged in online tactics to support their cause. As the SOS808 standoff unfolded, the group documented events in real time on Governor Lingle's Wikipedia page.²³ Instead of vandalizing the page, SOS808 strategically inserted narrative points sympathetic to their cause and contradicting the governor's public statements regarding the importance of public education. The amendments were debated and revised by another Wikipedia contributor and an objective account of the protest has become the current record of the incident. However, the activist interventions remain logged in the page's "Revision History." SOS808 engaged in forms of digital activism that pushed its cause to the public in inventive ways. One site was eBay, the online auction and shopping website. SOS808 posted the furloughs for sale and asked buyers to purchase a day of school. The price reflected the cost of funding all public school employees for a day of school. While eBay is not known for being a site of activism, nonetheless, the posting eBay carried offline protest into an online space. The SOS808 wrote an item description that stated the organization's talking points and an image of a sign that stated "Lingle Daycare" to assign blame for the state of Hawaii's public education system. Furthermore, SOS808 tagged the post as belonging to "Education & Learning" such that the issue would be seen by eBay buyers and sellers in search of resources about education and learning. SOS808 is an example of the emerging genres of digital Asian American literature, creative protests that push Asian American narratives across online platforms. Their choice to write born-digital content was notable as it was happening during a moment when their adversary, Governor Lingle, had no blog, Twitter feed, YouTube channel, or active Facebook page to respond. SOS808's facility with the online platform thus gave them access to an avenue of dynamic creation and dissemination.

The Intersection of Race and Technology

The digital age is incubating an innovative and activist literature in the imagination of the Asian American experience. Social media compositions reflect a spirit of empowerment and critique in Asian America, viewing writing as a form of intervention. Asian Americans have mobilized on these new media

opportunities to generate forms of expression that are creatively disruptive, resistant, and generative. While this chapter outlines some of the ways that Asian Americans are crafting online life, the enthusiastic Asian American embrace of born-digital forms of creation ought not to be the impetus for the construction of yet another stereotype of Asian Americans as the model minority of digital media use. New media liberates Asian Americans from the stranglehold of traditional platforms of expression, and this liberation can continue to engender startling forms of creativity, critique, and controversy. For all the cultural capital built by the Twitter activism of #CancelColbert, the movement also fractured as alliances formed across the Asian American Twitter community inasmuch as it forged them. Asian American writing during the digital age illustrates the complex intersection between race and technology.

Too often, the popular view of technology overlooks the discourse of race in favor of a discourse of innovation and access – that is, focusing on the latest technological advances, software and hardware upgrades, and efforts to expand access to technology and overcome the “digital divide.” For racial minorities who have been excluded in popular and national industries and institutions of culture, the digital literature of Asian Americans has intent and effect. The significance of these creative media expressions extends beyond the mere use of technology or presence on a platform by Asian Americans – Asian American digital literature is designed to impact offline behavior and serves as a point of access to and alternate vision of national and popular culture.

The emerging force and novelty of Asian American literature in its digital forms joins the simultaneous rise of the “Digital Humanities,” a broad and overlapping field of study and application that employs and analyzes computing tools and digital pedagogies in the teaching and research of the humanities. The digitizing of materials such as art, books, images, and sounds has widened the accessibility to these works and deepened the engagement with them. The Digital Humanities addresses the variety of ways texts are being reimaged through algorithms, social media, software programs, and visualizations in research, in and outside the classroom, and beyond.

While the Digital Humanities appears to be the movement for studying the importance of Asian American digital life, Asian American digital life may yield increased insight for the Digital Humanities. In spite of technical innovations in humanities scholarship, Tara McPherson notes the absence of race and its critical insights in the Digital Humanities. For McPherson, the “whiteness” of the Digital Humanities runs deep. The absence of critical race discourse in technology can be traced to the development of foundational computational

systems and theories during the 1960s, a tumultuous and significant era for racial politics and the civil rights movement. Computational work operated within an intellectual climate that decontextualized and quantified knowledge and experience in favor of objective and modular approaches to technological design. Technology was “a primary delivery method of these new systems, and it seems at best naïve to imagine that cultural and computational operating systems don’t mutually infect one another.”²⁴ As Digital Humanities increasingly becomes a buzzword across archives, libraries, museums, and universities, the focus on the digitization of texts may have the unintended consequences of reifying attitudes about race studies as being marginal to core curriculums. Digital Humanities primarily focuses on broadening of access and the deepening of engagement with canonical texts. The volumes of materials undergoing digitization may privilege what is already adopted in classrooms and other venues of learning instead of diversifying materials, and in the case of archives, libraries, and museums, privileging objects already in a collection instead of expanding a collection so that it may be more diverse. If the long struggle to create Asian American studies courses, concentrations, and departments and hire faculty for teaching and research offers insight, then the notion of Asian American literature being a priority in the Digital Humanities will be a struggle. As the “ethnic studies” perspective remains as a niche or fringe knowledge as opposed to the canonical, Asian American writing nevertheless yields important critical insight about the project of race and America. The explosive interventions of Asian American creative digital expressions may be instrumental to realizing the full potential of the Digital Humanities; these cultural forms demonstrate the impact of race in the understanding of the digital age—how the racial experience is also a digital experience. Lisa Nakamura and Peter Chow-White make this point by arguing that “[c]ritical race studies must take account of the digital, and digital media and technology studies must take account of race.”²⁵ Race and digital technologies are mutually constitutive and exist in a relationship of coproduction. In its edgiest forms, Asian American digital literature can complicate Digital Humanities scholarship, illustrating the vibrancy and unpredictability of digital racial formations and offline action.

Wendy Hui Kyong Chun outlines the consideration of race *as* technology, to shift “from the what of race to the how of race, from knowing race to doing race by emphasizing the similarities between race and technology.”²⁶ Asian American literature as a digital racial formation can reframe the biopolitics of what race is and is not by explicating how online racial identities are constituted through acts of power/knowledge; the ways in which racial identities

are used online may resonate with experiences of other marginalized or privileged subjectivities and offer opportunities for coalitional politics or widen paths toward social justice. As Chun writes, to consider race as technology “displaces ontological questions of race-debates over what race really is and is not, focused on separating ideology from truth – with ethical questions: what relations does race set up?”²⁷ Seen in this way, Asian American literature in the digital age finds form in technology, content in activism, and application in concerns that investigate the politics of race as a digital formation. With the United States poised to experience profound demographic change that will shift discussions about race from a predominantly black-white framework to one that includes Asian-Latino experiences, Asian American literature in the digital age offers insight into the possibilities of writing in new media, and the use of new media to write the meaning of race in online spaces with offline, real-time effects.

Notes

- 1 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 2.
- 2 Lisa Nakamura and Peter Chow-White, “Introduction,” in *Race after the Internet*, ed. Lisa Nakamura and Peter Chow-White (New York: Routledge, 2012), 2.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 3.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Mimi Thi Nguyen and Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu invoke Richard Florida’s term “the creative class” to describe the high participation of Asian Americans in America’s creative industries, from technology, arts, and design. See Mimi Thi Nguyen and Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu, “Introduction,” in *Alien Encounters: Popular Cultures in Asian America*, ed. Mimi Thi Nguyen and Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 12–13; and Richard Florida, “Race, Gender, and the Creative Class,” *The Atlantic* (June 27, 2012).
- 6 Kimi Yoshino, “An E-Mail Push for ‘Better Luck’: Film about Asian American teens is one of a growing number of ethnic-focused and niche projects using grass-roots marketing efforts,” *Los Angeles Times* (April 11, 2003).
- 7 “Join the APA First Weekend Film Club,” Asian American Film. Online resource: <http://www.asianamericanfilm.com/firstweekend> (accessed November 29, 2014).
- 8 Rebecca Ascher-Walsh, “More Than Luck: For small indie films, word of mouth and e-mail marketing are fueling big success at the box office,” *Entertainment Weekly* (May 2, 2003).
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Beyond National Literatures: Empire and Amitav Ghosh

RUTH MAXEY

The Indian-born novelist Amitav Ghosh can be regarded as an Asian American writer in that he fits the definition of an “Asian-origin writer . . . living permanently in the United States.”¹ But his work belongs to a more global, ‘hemispheric’ theorization of Asian American literature because he is also fully transnational in personal and artistic terms.² Ghosh produces ambitious fictions, looking beyond the United States and spanning countries and continents. His work challenges nationalism, “national literatures,” and imperialism, or more specifically, “the anglophone empire . . . America, Britain, and Australia . . . the most potent political force of the past two centuries.”³

Ghosh treats the United States with caution across his writing, and he has stated that “I don’t think of myself as an American writer *at all*. I think of myself completely as an Indian writer.”⁴ Like other U.S.-based writers, he has also made explicitly anti-American pronouncements.⁵ His inclusion in this volume adds to our understanding of contemporary Asian American literature because he profoundly interrogates the importance of this imperialistic superpower, while laying little claim to the United States as his own country of domicile. His status also calls to mind the persistent questions surrounding the “term ‘Asian American’ . . . itself in constant instability . . . open to continued critical negotiation.”⁶ English is Ghosh’s medium of expression; he has two American children; and for many years, he has been based in New York. Thus, he remains physically and emotionally connected to America and, outside India, his popular and academic audience is primarily the Anglo-American world.⁷ Ghosh has also drawn increasingly upon particular U.S. literary genres by combining elements of the slave narrative and the racial passing novel in *Sea of Poppies* (2008), a novel that “represents [Ghosh’s] . . . first sustained engagement with the United States as an imperial nation . . . conceived under the shadow of war in Iraq and Afghanistan.”⁸ America appears sporadically in such early essays as “Tibetan Dinner” (1988) and “Four Corners” (1989) and at the end of the traveler’s tale *In an Antique Land* (1992). But the United States is

represented more prominently, through New York City, in Ghosh's novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), and such later nonfiction as "September 11" (2001) and "The Greatest Sorrow: Times of Joy Recalled in Wretchedness" (2001). New York also appears in the essays "Satyajit Ray" (2002) and "'The Ghat of the Only World': Agha Shahid Ali in Brooklyn" (2003).

More generally, however, Ghosh has never seemed fully at home on U.S. soil. The broader *national* contours of Asian America – political, social, cultural, and historical – are not especially apparent in his work, with South Asian America emerging only briefly through the essay on Agha Shahid Ali; Murugan, the U.S.-educated Indian researcher, in *The Calcutta Chromosome*; and Piya Roy, the Bengali American protagonist of Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004). It is revealing that both Piya and Murugan remain outside the United States throughout the narrative in which they feature. In *The Glass Palace* (2000), Ghosh briefly refers to Indians fighting British colonialism in early-twentieth-century America and to the imperialism of U.S. slavery through a nod to Harriet Beecher Stowe's classic novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Further, characters in *The Glass Palace* all visit or settle in the United States, but the novel never really accompanies them there.⁹ In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, New York takes on a futuristic, dystopian character when glimpsed fleetingly by Antar, an Egyptian eager to return to his country of origin. More recently, in *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh alludes briefly to nineteenth-century Baltimore, while name-checking Frederick Douglass, yet moves firmly "beyond the black Atlantic."¹⁰ Ghosh has also spoken of his debt to Herman Melville with the novel *Moby Dick* (1851), referenced in *The Hungry Tide*;¹¹ and *Sea of Poppies* gestures toward Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), through the naming of Chillingworth, Captain of the *Ibis*.

In this chapter, I will focus on Ghosh's relationship to the United States and its role in the Anglophone empire. That relationship is complex and difficult, which is unsurprising because he is a postcolonial writer who came of age in postindependence India. Between Ghosh's second novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988) and *Sea of Poppies*, the United States is his major Western counterpoint and embodiment, suggesting both that he has an American readership – and a South Asian American one at that¹² – partly in mind and that the United States' geopolitical centrality cannot be ignored. Yet he simultaneously decenters the United States, an absent presence in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Glass Palace*, *The Hungry Tide*, and *Sea of Poppies*, rejected either by fictional characters or by the course of the narrative.¹³ Thus, the material reality of the United States as a distinct nation remains putative and

unrealised. But as a global presence, it hovers, politically and ideologically, at the edges of Ghosh's writing, because he is implicated in the Anglophone empire through his mode of expression and because the United States has long been his physical base. Herein lies the particular tension driving Ghosh's treatment of the United States: How to negotiate, intellectually and morally, his own unease toward this world power, which has so clearly had an impact upon his life and work?

Ghosh scholarship has addressed issues of nationalism, postcolonial identity, ecocriticism, testimony, subalternity, and historiography. But the idea of Ghosh as an Asian American author with a particular relationship to the United States and its national mythologies, has barely been considered.¹⁴ In this discussion, I will therefore explore this neglected aspect of Ghosh's *œuvre* by looking at the idea of America in his writing and by situating his work within what I am terming "the Bengali American grain."¹⁵ This is because Ghosh writes a particular form of Indian regionalism, ethnicity, and history into American literature; challenges U.S. exceptionalism by proposing the uniqueness of South Asian experience from a specifically Bengali vantage point; and, arguing from a position of "postcolonial cosmopolitanism," offers his own vision of a transnational, "provincialized" America.¹⁶ Reading his work alongside that of other Bengali American writers¹⁷ and arguing that it is more ambitious thematically and more antiimperialistic, I will probe Ghosh's problematic relationship with the United States, asking how his hemispheric writing continues to extend and even alter the terrain often associated with Asian American literature.

In the Bengali American Grain?

Ghosh decisively and continuously interpolates Asia into U.S. literature and consciousness. India is absolutely central to his output but his interpretation of it is heavily localized. Returning time and again to Bengali characters and a West Bengali setting, thus demonstrating a real commitment to the region, Ghosh can be positioned alongside such writers as Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Divakaruni, and Jhumpa Lahiri. Yet he seldom features in discussions of Bengali American literature, which usually focus on women writers,¹⁸ and he is rarely regarded as straightforwardly diasporic, because of the strongly Indian nature of much of his literary material, his decision to divide his time between India and the United States, and his own public self-fashioning.¹⁹ Rather, critics have generally addressed the Bengali, but not the Bengali *American*, tradition to which Ghosh belongs.²⁰

He has argued that a sense of ethnic belonging is key to his artistic formation through the creative legacy of the leading Bengali writer, Rabindranath Tagore,²¹ and the world-renowned filmmaker, Satyajit Ray. In his essay on the Calcutta-based director, Ghosh writes:

I am more than ever aware of the part that Ray played in shaping the imaginary universe of my childhood and youth ... he was a rivet in an unbroken chain of aesthetic and intellectual effort that stretches back to the mid-nineteenth century – a chain in which I too am, I hope, a small link ... Ray's work ... moors me – often despite myself – to the imaginative landscape of Bengal ... the essential terrain of my own work.²²

Ghosh's paean to Ray suggests a firm Bengaliness, reflected too in the inspiration provided by "the Bengali storytelling voice ... a very intimate voice which invites you into the story ... whenever I get stuck in my work, I ... try to listen to that voice."²³ Like Mukherjee and Lahiri, he seeks to educate the wider world about Bengali culture, history, and topography. To that end, he places Kolkata (or Calcutta in its earlier designation) and the Sundarbans within the landscape of American fiction through such novels as *The Shadow Lines*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Hungry Tide*, and *Sea of Poppies*.

Mukherjee writes that "to be a native-born Calcuttan was (and is) to be a Londoner, a Parisian, a New Yorker, at the zenith."²⁴ Ghosh feels less need to convince the outside world of Kolkata's significance, yet he is more concerned than Mukherjee with the region's past, especially as it has been overlooked by ethnic outsiders, including those within India. Thus, in *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh highlights the Bengali dimensions of Partition in a bildungsroman, where the unnamed child narrator's lack of awareness arguably stands in for the presumption of the reader's own. *The Shadow Lines* is about the vital importance of excavating and recording key moments in twentieth-century Bengali history and it also memorializes the Hindu-Muslim riots in Calcutta in January 1964, which left more than one hundred people dead.²⁵ Local history reappears in *The Hungry Tide* through recollections of "the policy of 'armed struggle' adopted in Calcutta in 1948" and "the terrible famine that ... devastated Bengal in 1942" (77, 79).²⁶

Moving beyond the strictly Bengali, Ghosh suggests the uniqueness of South Asian experience in *The Shadow Lines* through the narrator's recollections of that life-changing day from his Calcutta childhood in January 1964:

That particular fear ... is without analogy. ... It ... comes of the knowledge that normalcy is utterly contingent, that the spaces that surround one ... can become, suddenly and without warning, as hostile as a desert

in a flash flood. It is this that sets apart the thousand million people who inhabit the subcontinent from the rest of the world ... the special quality of loneliness that grows out of the fear of the war between oneself and one's image in the mirror.²⁷

A “thousand million people” forces us to rethink the more common usage, “billion,” in a moment of realization that implicitly interrogates America. Predicated on the idea of its exceptionalism in relation to other nations, the specialness of the United States is arguably challenged here by the particularity of South Asian lives, or the “fear ... that sets apart the ... people [of] ... the subcontinent from the rest of the world” (204). This claim of South Asian exceptionalism – repeated elsewhere when Ghosh argues that “nations ... matter ... most of all ... in the subcontinent, more than in any other place in the world”²⁸ – can be understood “as a powerful ingredient of a national consciousness – particularly in times of transition.”²⁹ In other words, every nation or geopolitical region may see itself as unique to some degree. But Ghosh's statement in *The Shadow Lines* also serves as a defensive strike against perceived Western prejudices about Indian lives. Thus, Ila, a Bengali expatriate based in the West, expresses contempt for India through her sense that its

famines ... riots and disasters ... are local things ... nothing that's really remembered. She seemed immeasurably distant ... in her quiet pity for the pettiness of lives like mine, lived out in the silence of voiceless events in a backward world. (104)

In response to such attitudes, Ghosh deliberately renders civil violence in the novel as anything but silent or “voiceless.”

Ila's Western-inflected dismissal also invites comparison with earlier Bengali American writing, specifically Mukherjee's short story “The Lady from Lucknow” (1985), where Nafeesa Hafeez also experiences a moment of double consciousness when she sees herself through the eyes of an older white woman: “I was a shadow without depth or colour ... who would float back to a city of teeming millions when the affair with James had ended.”³⁰ In a firm rejection of the “shadow” designation, Mukherjee renders the adulterous Nafeesa as a flesh-and-blood, sexually adventurous woman, while the narrator of *The Shadow Lines* similarly counters Ila's version of the insignificant “shadow” people populating a “backward” India with his sense of knowing “people of my own age, who had survived the Great Terror in the Calcutta of the ‘sixties and ‘seventies ...” (105).

Referring here to the Naxalite movement – Maoist revolutionaries active between 1967 and 1973, who provide the backdrop to Mukherjee's first novel

The Tiger's Daughter (1971) and Lahiri's novel *The Lowland* (2013) – Ghosh shifts the emphasis from the Anglophone “West” to the polyglot “East,” and specifically to West Bengal, as center of the world. He also pays tribute to the courage of those who “survived the Great Terror” (105). Such historiographical debates are written into Lahiri's short story “When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine” (1999), which may be read intertextually against *The Shadow Lines*.³¹ Here historical events affecting ethnic Bengalis – namely, the Indo-Pakistani war of 1971 – are interpreted through the eyes of a child, Lilia, in an American setting.³²

The focus of *The Hungry Tide* is broadly, and unusually in Ghosh's recent fiction, contemporary. Yet it relies, like *The Shadow Lines*, on specific historical moments in West Bengal, most importantly the Morichjhāpi incident in the Sundarbans or “tide country” (as Ghosh calls it in the novel) when refugees, settled illegally on the island of Morichjhāpi, were brutally raped and massacred by the state authorities in 1979. The geographical setting of the tide country is perilous and little known, and Ghosh places it unforgettably on the global literary map. He has since framed this location in terms, once again, of South Asian exceptionalism, claiming recently that the population of the Sundarbans face “the most difficult material circumstances of anyone anywhere.”³³ When Nirmal writes to his nephew Kanai that Morichjhāpi is “a place . . . you will probably never have heard of” (67), this is not simply a matter of local events or of a personal correspondence. That “you” could address many of Ghosh's readers and indeed, forging his own form of historical revisionism, Ghosh uses West Bengal to stand for India as he extrapolates wider points about the place of dispossessed people and forces Morichjhāpi, in Nirmal's phrase, “*upon the memory of the world*” (69, emphasis in original) in this transnational Asian American novel.

This regionalized focus relates to a further degree of exceptionalism within Ghosh's writing: a contemporary reconceptualization of the special historical status of Bengalis in India and particularly of educated, middle-class Bengalis – that is, members of the *bhadrasamaj* – as an elite within colonial India. As Makarand Paranjape has argued, “this amorphous and diverse ‘middle class’ was not only constituted by colonialism but also went on to resist it to help forge the nation that became India.”³⁴ Ghosh was born into such a class and acts as a kind of modern-day *bhadralok* (or middle-class male) interlocutor for subaltern Bengalis in *The Hungry Tide*, as do such characters as Kanai and Nirmal. By implication, exceptionalism takes an ethnic, as well as a national, form in such works as *The Shadow Lines* and *The Hungry Tide*.

Writing Asian America

The Hungry Tide also marks Ghosh's main imaginative attempt to write about Asian America from a more U.S.-centric perspective, through the figure of Piya, a marine biologist in the Sundarbans. She has forgotten the Bengali she once knew while growing up in the United States and this loss of language is arguably deliberate because she associates Bengali with the unhappy marriage of her parents: immigrants locked into the "accumulated resentments of their life" (93–4) in a small apartment in Seattle before her mother's early death from cervical cancer. Piya's inability to speak Bengali may also signal an implied critique of U.S. parochialism and the global hegemony of the "Anglophone empire" whose subjects display "monoglot attitudes," because of the preeminence of English.³⁵

Ghosh's choice of Seattle in the novel is significant and surely deliberate in terms of Asian American history. After all, the Pacific Northwest was an important site of settlement for Japanese Americans, as we see in John Okada's novel *No-No Boy* (1957), and for some of the first South Asian North Americans across the U.S.-Canada border in British Columbia. The importance of an Asian American West Coast is intimated through the references to California where Piya has studied marine biology at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in San Diego. And returning to Seattle, Ghosh links Puget Sound to eastern India through the image of Piya's dying mother "resting her eyes on the sound" because it reminds her of her "girlhood staring at a view of a river – the Brahmaputra" (95). Similarly, Piya connects "the first known specimen of *Orcaella brevirostris*," first discovered in Kolkata, with "the majestic killer whales of Puget Sound" (95). Thus, in a hemispheric Asian American gesture typical of Ghosh, the United States – in its own regional variant – can only be understood in dialectical relation to India and indeed to specific areas within it.³⁶

The aroma of Indian spices in cooking also belongs to Piya's experiences as a young Bengali girl growing up in the United States "when she discovered, from pointed jokes and chance playground comments, that the odours followed her everywhere, like unseen pets" (97). Ghosh's account of a Bengali American childhood recalls what S. Mitra Kalita has called "'IFS' ... Indian Food Smell" and the impact of this "gastronomic anxiety" on young South Asian Americans.³⁷ Through the animism of Ghosh's image of "odours" as "pets," he breathes fresh life into this familiar terrain. But once again, American life as a domestic phenomenon is handled at a remove. By contrast to the rich psychological depth of Lahiri's treatment of Bengali American

lives – in her hands, the Roys’ bitterness and disillusionment with immigrant life would have been the complex subject of an entire short story, or even a novel – Ghosh sums up South Asian American life as it is experienced within the United States in just a few pages.

Unlike the Sundarbans in this novel, which deserves epic treatment in order to do justice to a particular way of life, Bengali American experience is not considered the proper stuff of storytelling here. And in nodding to such recognized tropes as disappointed immigrant hopes, loneliness, early parental death,³⁸ and ethnic shame – but without investigating them properly – Ghosh’s depiction of Asian America in a national sense risks cliché and superficiality. Piya represents a South Asian American essentially alone in the world, suggesting both a kind of exceptional status and that the domestic aspects of Asian America are not within Ghosh’s comfort zone. As Inderpal Grewal has argued, his “postcolonial cosmopolitanism lead[s] Ghosh to write against the West . . . from the cosmopolitan subjectivity of the writer of literature, instead of probing the complexity of living within it.”³⁹

Piya’s American identity – and the relative lack of importance of Asian, and specifically Bengali, America to Ghosh’s fictional project – might also be linked to his early essay, “Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel” (1992). Here he notes that literature in Bengali is full of

innumerable short stories and novels about expatriates in New Jersey, California, and various parts of Europe. Yet the hundreds of thousands of Bengali-speaking people who live and work in the oil kingdoms scarcely ever merit literary attention.⁴⁰

While Ghosh’s assertion is about the need to give voice to a vast, floating, overlooked population of Bengali migrant workers, explored in his first novel *The Circle of Reason* (1986), he is also signaling his own lack of excitement, even impatience, toward what he sees as the overrepresented lives of Bengali Americans.

Ghosh is alluding here to the place of such “expatriates” in Bengali-language literature in the early 1990s, yet his claim might be extended to more recent fiction in English and in particular to the dominant status in South Asian American letters enjoyed by such successful ethnic Bengalis as Mukherjee, Divakaruni, and Lahiri. Their work, which has won prizes and often achieved popular appeal, suggests that Bengali exceptionalism continues to play out within areas of the South Asian diaspora. But Ghosh’s writing rejects the thematic emphasis on America generally found within this *œuvre*, marking him as a “postcolonial” rather than an “ethnic” South Asian American writer in Rajini

Srikanth's distinction.⁴¹ For him, the Bengali diaspora cannot be understood in U.S. terms alone. The fiction of Mukherjee, Divakaruni, and Lahiri does not merely concentrate on the United States, however: it, too, is transnational, encompassing South Asia, Canada, Central America, Western Europe, and Southeast Asia.

At the same time, Ghosh's work has a consistently greater spatial and temporal sweep than that of his Bengali American peers. He has produced novels set in a broader range of eras and countries, narratives that are conceived on a more epic scale, speak of wider interests, and marshal a more impressive cast of characters in, for example, a multigenerational saga such as *The Glass Palace* or his maritime *Ibis* novels than anything by Mukherjee, Divakaruni, or Lahiri. In his critical distance from the Anglophone empire and the sheer historical ambition that he demonstrates in such epic narratives as *The Glass Palace*, *Sea of Poppies*, and *River of Smoke* (2011), he also offers a more penetrating investigation of imperialism than his Bengali American counterparts. This might be explained generationally because Ghosh was born not long after Indian independence. But Mukherjee came of age in the postindependence period and her work also critiques the arrogance of British colonialism. The difference between them arises from Ghosh's deeper historicization of the British Empire and his continued interest in other forms of imperialism.

Ghosh's position on world events is always politically marked, whether he is exploring earlier eras of globalization and transnationalism – medieval commerce in the Indian Ocean, the opium trade in the Age of Sail, and the growth of the Indian diaspora globally – or regarding such phenomena in contemporary terms through U.S. neo-imperialism, the place of the United Nations in Cambodia, South Asia's nuclear capability, economic migration within the Middle East, or the far-reaching effects of climate change and the importance of conservation. As distinct from the writing of his fellow Bengali Americans, Ghosh's sustained literary commitment to reporting on and critiquing the state of the world – a project often centripetally linked to India – is a resolutely political act. It is, moreover, key to our understanding of him as a hemispheric writer moving Asian American literature in ever more transnational and geographically novel directions.⁴²

Why, then, does Ghosh opt for a second-generation Bengali American protagonist in *The Hungry Tide*? Reinscribing the ethnic exceptionalism I discussed earlier, Ghosh arguably continues a thought experiment begun with his assumption of an American English voice through Murugan in *The Calcutta Chromosome*. That Piya represents a fictional experiment for Ghosh is hardly surprising. His children may hold U.S. passports, but the experience of an

American childhood is no more the writer's own than Fokir's life as a fisherman in the Sundarbans in the same novel or, more challengingly, the dizzyingly detailed historical worlds of *The Glass Palace*, *Sea of Poppies*, and *River of Smoke*. And Ghosh's exploration of Piya's Bengali American identity becomes most incisive when he moves the focus away from the U.S. terrain of the "innumerable short stories and novels" he appears to dismiss in "Petrofiction"⁴³ and deploys a more transnational Asian American perspective.

Piya is, like second-generation characters visiting India in such stories as Lahiri's "Interpreter of Maladies" (1999) and Divakaruni's "The Lives of Strangers" (2001), something of a wandering soul in her ancestral homeland: unlike "her Kolkata cousins, who wielded the insignia of their upper-middle-class upbringing like laser-guided weaponry . . . she had no . . . idea of what her own place was in the great scheme of things" (34–5). Such existential questions notwithstanding, Piya is different from other nonresident Indians (NRIs) engaging in forms of "ethnic return" and seeking to connect with their heritage, visitors who are often punished for their naïveté and lack of local knowledge.⁴⁴ Piya is no ignorant "roots" tourist, bidding to understand her familial traditions, even if her NRI perspective sometimes threatens to cloud her vision of local people.⁴⁵ Rather, she brings hard-won scientific expertise to the region and educates Kanai and the reader about cetacean life, while painstakingly accumulating her own tide country knowledge. And unlike other foreigners visiting the area, Piya comes back to settle there.⁴⁶

She recalls the eponymous protagonist of Michael Ondaatje's novel *Anil's Ghost* (2000): a Sri Lankan American forensic anthropologist whose ethnic return is conducted for specific professional reasons. Both Ghosh and Ondaatje seem to suggest that young diasporic South Asians may "return" if they can bring a specialist skill to the table. Work becomes crucial in uniting Bengalis in India with their diaspora and "proposing . . . an ethics . . . which aspires to reconcile global and local concerns."⁴⁷ But Piya's investment in the Sundarbans is also ultimately problematic, as several critics have noted. Robbie Goh, for instance, argues convincingly that "Piya's plans to start a research project named for Fokir . . . does [*sic*] not change the fact that Fokir dies in service of her research."⁴⁸

Goh also refers to Piya as "an Overseas Indian" and "a fully fledged expatriate," but these terms overwrite Piya's American status – after all, she is described by Moyna, a local nurse, simply as "the American" (257, 259) – and the relationship between the United States and India set up by the novel.⁴⁹ Thus, in Piya's early life, she brought India to America and now she brings

the United States to a remote corner of India, rather like the U.S. mailbags used in Sundarban fishing boats. When she is working in the field, Kanai regards her “silhouette . . . [as] not unlike that of a cowboy, with her holster of equipment around her hips and her wide-brimmed hat” (266): a classically American image of rugged individualism. At the same time, America is decentred because Piya has to travel to India to find meaningful work and because, as we saw earlier, the United States can only be interpreted in relation to India. Through Piya, Ghosh pits India and America against each other ideologically and ethically, as when Kanai discusses human mortality rates in the Sundarbans. Thus, the United States – and Asian Americans – must be regarded in transnational, hemispheric terms.

The two nations are also implicitly in conversation when Kanai views Moyna in the light of Indian social mobility. This actually takes the form of Piya imagining Kanai’s thought that “everyone who has any drive, any energy, wants to get on in the world” (220). Refracted through Piya, this sounds rather like the classic mythology of the American Dream, as though Ghosh may, once again, be drawing upon U.S. discourses. Social mobility is, of course, an Indian concept, which Ghosh addresses in “The Town by the Sea” (2005) and in his contention that “India . . . lets you be exactly who you want to be,” a somewhat utopian view based, perhaps, on his own class and gender privilege.⁵⁰ In *The Hungry Tide*, Kanai’s perspective is made problematic by being conceptualized at several removes, as one character (Piya) imagines another character (Kanai) thinking about a third character (Moyna). Thus, social mobility is no more a safe orthodoxy here than it is a readily achievable goal. Indeed, Piya believes that it reassures Kanai to think in such an egalitarian way precisely because he needs to believe that India is a meritocracy. But in a novel of multiple translations and ventriloquisms, which dramatizes the whole problem of giving voice to the powerless, Ghosh complicates the point. He does this by using a U.S. character to question an idea recalling a famously American myth of success through an Indian character’s imagined thoughts.

Deterritorializing Asian American Literature

In terms of “the Bengali American grain,” Ghosh’s writing sits both within and outside this tradition. For one thing, his work is much less invested in the United States and the realities of Indian American experience in the United States than the writing of Mukherjee, Lahiri, or Divakaruni. Time and again, Ghosh’s work employs a richer spatial and historical scope,

despite the bold intentions of Mukherjee's fine historical novel *The Holder of the World* (1993), the colonial sections of her later novel *The Tree Bride* (2004), and Lahiri's use of history in "When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine," "Sexy" (1999), and *The Lowland*. Ghosh's *œuvre* also questions the systems and workings of imperialism, past and present, more searchingly than anything by his Bengali American peers.

Ghosh's treatment of West Bengal is different, too. It is more historicized and ecocritical, more focused on the rural than the urban, and more comfortable with contemporary Bengali realities than the writing of, for example, Mukherjee or Lahiri. In the essay "The March of the Novel through History: The Testimony of My Grandfather's Bookcase" (1998), Ghosh argues that "location is . . . intrinsic to a novel" before contending that "those of us who love novels often read them because of the eloquence with which they communicate a 'sense of place.' Yet . . . it is the very loss of a lived sense of place that makes their fictional representation possible."⁵¹ Through Ghosh's imaginative recreation of place – particularly Calcutta/Kolkata and the Sundarbans – richly conceived fictions such as *The Shadow Lines*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Hungry Tide*, and *Sea of Poppies* are made possible. In this sense, Ghosh's writing can be read according to Kandice Chuh's formulation of "Asian Americanist hemispheric studies . . . [wherein] the significance of spatial location, the negotiation of linguistic differences, and the impact of variegated histories . . . are explored."⁵²

Just as Mukherjee's bid to reinvent American literature has been ambitious, so Ghosh's stylistic and generic techniques have been bold and experimental, especially in his early work. These methods have recently given way to more conventionally linear storytelling, yet his fiction and essays remain thematically more daring than the work of other Bengali American writers. In his nonfiction especially, he offers the reader news, often bringing remote or little-known places and periods to life. Despite his stake in Bengalianness, Ghosh strives to move beyond regional and sectarian belonging through the theme of Indian identity *tout court*, both within and outside the motherland. Unlike Lahiri and Divakaruni, whose accounts of ethnic return imply that "'Indianness' . . . can become almost void of meaning" in the sense that there is little common ground between Indians and an American-born diasporic generation,⁵³ Ghosh suggests the necessity of believing in a unified Indianness. He does so even though his own impassioned, repeated emphasis on Bengalianness calls such an idea into question by reiterating the special ethno-cultural status of West Bengal within India; and even though his belief in a shared Indianness is a contradiction in terms because, in his own words, "being Indian . . . gives

you this wonderful chameleon-like quality . . . any statement you make about India . . . the opposite is also true.”⁵⁴

The need to believe in a wider Indianness is driven both by the horrors of religiously motivated civil violence in India and by a more utopian desire to get past ethnic, caste, and societal divisions. Thus, “The Ghat of the Only World” goes beyond a personal promise to memorialize Agha Shahid Ali and celebrates a collective, culturally Indian identity, as Ghosh recalls the two writers discovering “a huge roster of common friends, in India, America, and elsewhere . . . a shared love of rogan josh, Roshanara Begum and Kishore Kumar; a mutual indifference to cricket and an equal attachment to old Bombay films.”⁵⁵ We learn that for Ali, such interests or “good things” take on a more powerful resonance in America because “here we have been able to make a space where we can all come together because of the good things.”⁵⁶ Ghosh’s belief in a collective Indianness is reflected in *The Hungry Tide*, where the tide country seems to offer freedom from caste, the promise of social mobility and Indian belonging for NRIs, and in *Sea of Poppies*, where the indentured collective on board the *Ibis* allows a common Indianness to prevail over old caste designations. As Anjali Gera Roy has put it, “through merging the stories of different kinds of travellers . . . in *Sea of Poppies* [and *The Glass Palace*] . . . Ghosh demonstrates the dissolution of boundaries of language, class and caste among those who are forced to travel.”⁵⁷ His ethnic Indians endlessly grapple with the mystery of national and transnational identity. However contradictory and mystifying this self-image is, Ghosh feels compelled to continue examining it throughout his writing.

Even as his main interests lie beyond the United States, Ghosh’s experiences of living and working in America for some twenty years, and now leading a more peripatetic existence between New York and India, have liberated him and enabled him creatively to challenge “national literatures” through his transnational literary works. In this chapter, I have considered Ghosh’s complex, critical treatment of the United States and the “Anglophone empire” through a Bengali American lens, as he repeatedly depicts Americans outside the United States and relegates the nation to the margins of his hemispheric narratives, yet bids to make Bengali historical events involving civil and state violence into new forms of American public memory, and cites iconic American figures and texts (Frederick Douglass, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *Moby Dick*). In doing so, Ghosh’s writing radically troubles what are still national canons of literature even in, and arguably because of, our globalized world. His writing “deterritorializes English . . . from a point of view that is essentially that of an outsider.”⁵⁸ It thus continues, like that of other leading Asian American writers such as Karen Tei

Yamashita and Chang-rae Lee, to expand the definitional, discursive, temporal, and geopolitical limits of Asian American literature. That it does so makes continued critical engagement with Ghosh's work all the more necessary.

Notes

- 1 Susan Koshy, "The Rise of the Asian American Novel," in *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, ed. Leonard Casuto et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1047.
- 2 Kandice Chuh, "Of Hemispheres and Other Spheres: Navigating Karen Tei Yamashita's Literary World," *American Literary History* 18.3 (2006): 618–20.
- 3 Amitav Ghosh, *Incendiary Circumstances: A Chronicle of the Turmoil of Our Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 28.
- 4 Quoted in Claire Chambers, "'The Absolute Essentialness of Conversations': A Discussion with Amitav Ghosh," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 41.1 (2005): 36. Emphasis in original.
- 5 Ibid., 36. Also, see Lila Azam Zanganeh, "Lila Azam Zanganeh Interviews Amitav Ghosh," *Excavation* (May 15, 2011). Online resource: www.guernicamag.com/interviews/ghosh_5_15_11/ (accessed June 27, 2014).
- 6 Stephen Hong Sohn, Paul Lai, and Donald Goellnicht, "Introduction: Theorizing Asian American Fiction," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 56.1 (2010): 2; and compare David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 12, 337.
- 7 Compare Inderpal Grewal, *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 48, and Anshuman A. Mondal, *Amitav Ghosh* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 163.
- 8 Elleke Boehmer and Anshuman A. Mondal, "Networks and Traces: An Interview with Amitav Ghosh," *Wasafiri* 27.2 (2012): 34.
- 9 Compare Rajini Srikanth, *The World Next Door: South Asian American Literature and the Idea of America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 93.
- 10 Jacob Crane, "Beyond the Cape: Amitav Ghosh, Frederick Douglass and the Limits of the Black Atlantic," *Postcolonial Text* 6.4 (2011): 3.
- 11 Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* (London: HarperCollins, 2005), 304. Further references in parentheses in the text. See also Zanganeh, "Amitav Ghosh"; and John Thieme, "Amitav Ghosh: *The Hungry Tide*," *Literary Encyclopedia* (December 27, 2007). Online resource: www.litencyc.com (accessed June 27, 2014).
- 12 Ghosh told an interviewer in 2007 that he thinks of his readership "as . . . India and the diaspora" before sharing an anecdote about ethnic Indian readers of his work in the United States. See Zanganeh, "Amitav Ghosh."
- 13 Compare Crane, "Beyond the Cape," 5, where he notes that "the Atlantic world exists in the novel only as memory" (emphasis in original).
- 14 The rare exceptions are Srikanth, *World Next Door*, 9–10, 37–40, 90–4; Grewal, *Transnational America*, 38–41, 45–58; and Sohn, Lai, and Goellnicht, "Introduction," 15.
- 15 Adapting the title of William Carlos Williams's classic study, *In the American Grain* (1925), I am using "grain" to mean the fiber and texture of wood.

- 16 Grewal, *Transnational America*, 38. The notion of a “provincialized” America is borrowed from Kavita Daiya, following Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe* (2000); see Kavita Daiya, “Provincializing America: Engaging Postcolonial Critique and Asian American Studies in a Transnational Mode,” *South Asian Review* 26.2 (2005): 26.
- 17 Compare Grewal, *Transnational America*, 35–42.
- 18 See, e.g., Somdatta Mandal, “The City of the Mind or Return to the Roots? Representations of Calcutta in the Fiction of Diasporic Bengali Women Writers,” in *Indias Abroad: The Empire Writes Back*, ed. Rajendra Chetty et al. (Johannesburg: STE, 2004), 127–42, and Sanjukta Dasgupta, “Locating ‘Home’ in a Liminal Space: Longing and Belonging in the Fiction of ‘Bengali’ American Women Writers,” in *Interpreting Homes in South Asian Literature*, ed. Malashri Lal et al. (Delhi: Dorling Kindersley, 2007), 75–95.
- 19 Ghosh has claimed that “I’m not really a diasporic in the sense that I grew up in India. I’m returning to India . . . I’ve been away for a while.” Quoted in Zanganeh, “Amitav Ghosh.” Also, see Makarand Paranjape, “Beyond the Subaltern Syndrome: Amitav Ghosh and the Crisis of the *Bhadrasmaj*,” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 47.3 (2012): 366, regarding Ghosh as distinctly diasporic.
- 20 See Bishnupriya Ghosh, *When Borne Across: Literary Cosmopolitics in the Contemporary Indian Novel* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 152–6, 173, 179–183; Mondal, *Amitav Ghosh*, 3–5, 30–7; and Paranjape, “Beyond the Subaltern Syndrome,” 358–63, 366–7, 371.
- 21 Amitav Ghosh, *The Imam and the Indian: Prose Pieces* (New Delhi: Ravi Dayal), xii.
- 22 Amitav Ghosh, “Satyajit Ray,” in *Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Companion*, ed. Tabish Khair (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003), 5–6, 8.
- 23 Quoted in Zanganeh, “Amitav Ghosh.”
- 24 Bharati Mukherjee, *Desirable Daughters* (New York: Hyperion, 2002), 22.
- 25 See Ghosh, *The Imam*, 316, where he notes the silence surrounding the “civil violence” in Calcutta in 1964 when he did research for *The Shadow Lines*.
- 26 See also Amitav Ghosh, *The Glass Palace* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), 477.
- 27 Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines* (New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 2004), 204. Further references in parentheses in the text.
- 28 Cited in T. Vijay Kumar, “‘“Postcolonial” describes you as a negative’: An Interview with Amitav Ghosh,” *Interventions* 9.1 (2007): 101.
- 29 Srikanth, *World Next Door*, 36.
- 30 Bharati Mukherjee, *Darkness* (Markham, ON: Penguin, 1985), 33. Compare Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American*, 340.
- 31 Compare Floyd Cheung and Lavina Dhingra, “The Inheritance of Postcolonial Loss, Asian American Melancholia, and Strategies of Compensation in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*,” in *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*, ed. Lavina Dhingra et al. (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2012), 36–7.
- 32 See Daiya, “Provincializing America,” 267–70.
- 33 Amitav Ghosh, “How ‘History’ Becomes ‘Fiction,’” panel discussion hosted by Global, Colonial and Postcolonial Network, University of Leicester, UK (November 12, 2013).
- 34 Paranjape, “Beyond the Subaltern Syndrome,” 358.
- 35 Christopher Rollason, “‘In Our Translated World’: Transcultural Communication in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*,” *The Atlantic Literary Review* 6.1–2 (2005). Online

- resource: yatrarollason.info/files/GhoshHungryTide.pdf (accessed June 27, 2014). Compare Srikanth, *World Next Door*, 32–3.
- 36 Compare Srikanth, *World Next Door*, 3–5, 9–10, 31.
- 37 S. Mitra Kalita, *Suburban Sahibs: Three Immigrant Families and Their Passage from India to America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 2; Ruth Maxey, *South Asian Atlantic Literature, 1970–2010* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 183–4, note 206.
- 38 Compare Ruth Maxey, “Mother-Weights and Lost Fathers: Parents in South Asian American Literature,” *Wasafiri* 27.1 (2012): 25–31.
- 39 Grewal, *Transnational America*, 48.
- 40 Ghosh, *The Imam*, 78.
- 41 Srikanth, *World Next Door*, 44.
- 42 Compare Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American*, 392–3.
- 43 Ghosh, *The Imam*, 78.
- 44 Maxey, *South Asian Atlantic*, 99.
- 45 Rollason, “In Our Translated World.”
- 46 The likely success of her relocation to India, however, is left open to question; other novels about Indian Americans settling in the ancestral nation – for instance, Ameena Meer’s *Bombay Talkie* (1994) and Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* (2008) – suggest that such a move is doomed to failure. On the latter novel, see Robbie B. H. Goh, “The Overseas Indian and the Political Economy of the Body in Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* and Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*,” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 47.3 (2012): 345.
- 47 Thieme, “Amitav Ghosh.”
- 48 Goh, “Overseas Indian,” 354.
- 49 *Ibid.*, 350–1.
- 50 Quoted in Zanganeh, “Amitav Ghosh.”
- 51 Ghosh, *The Imam*, 294, 303.
- 52 Chuh, “Of Hemispheres,” 635.
- 53 Maxey, *South Asian Atlantic*, 97.
- 54 Quoted in Zanganeh, “Amitav Ghosh.”
- 55 Ghosh, *The Imam*, 342.
- 56 *Ibid.*, 346.
- 57 Anjali Gera Roy, “Ordinary People on the Move: Subaltern Cosmopolitanisms in Amitav Ghosh’s Writings,” *Asiatic* 6.1 (2012): 42.
- 58 Paranjape, “Beyond the Subaltern Syndrome,” 370.

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