RE-VIEWING
ASIAN AMERICAN
LITERARY STUDIES
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Asian American literature – defined here as works by people of Asian descent who were either born in or who have migrated to North America – has undergone dramatic changes since it emerged as a distinctive field in the wake of the civil rights movement in the late 1960s. The most visible difference arises from its rapid and extensive growth over the past three decades. There was a time when teachers and scholars moaned at having to teach or write about the same works, mostly by Chinese American and Japanese American writers, over and over again. Today the difficulty lies in representing and selecting among writers of diverse national origins. As this literature – along with the theory and criticism accompanying it – expands, original parameters are modified and contested; paralleling the explosion in volume is a proliferation of perspectives.

A significant switch in emphasis has also occurred in Asian American literary studies. Whereas identity politics – with its stress on cultural nationalism and American nativity – governed earlier theoretical and critical formulations, the stress is now on heterogeneity and diaspora. The shift has been from seeking to “claim America” to forging a connection between Asia and Asian America; from centering on race and on masculinity to revolving around the multiple axes of ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality; from being concerned primarily with social history and communal responsibility to being caught in the quandaries and possibilities of postmodernism and multiculturalism. The term “shift” can be misleading, however, for the recent critical moves have by no means replaced earlier exigencies. The two phases of Asian American cultural criticism may more accurately be characterized as a dialectic that continues to spark debate. I shall attempt to map some major courses this discursive development has taken. As scholars in the field, we know literary and critical anthologies are often inflected by the editors’ particular beliefs and interests – biases that surface most clearly in the books’
introductions. What follows is therefore less an objective review than a subjective re-viewing of Asian American literary studies. Rather than "defining" the field, I will grapple with its crosscurrents.¹

IDENTITY, CULTURAL NATIONALISM, HETEROGENEITY

The umbrella term “Asian American” was coined in the late 1960s to promote political solidarity and cultural nationalism. This movement was a broad-based one, appealing to immigrants and American-born Asians alike. By contrast, early Asian American cultural criticism – which emerged during this period as part of the larger movement – placed much greater emphasis on American nativity. In the influential introduction to *Aiiiiiiiiiiel An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (1974), edited by Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong, the editors regarded American nativity as crucial to what they considered to be Asian American “sensibility” – one “that was neither Asian nor white American” (1974/1983, xxii). They also decried the notion of a “dual personality, of going from one culture to another” (vii, xi). Only writers of Chinese, Filipino, and Japanese descent were included in their anthology.

More recently, however, critics such as Lisa Lowe (1991), Oscar Campomanes (1992), Shirley Lim (1993), and R. Radhakrishnan (1994) have challenged the idea of a unifying Asian American sensibility and underlined the need to take into account “heterogeneity,” “exile,” and “diaspora” when reading Asian American literature. These alternative modes of reading suggest that the editors of *Aiiiiiiiiiiel*, in rejecting the concept of the dual personality, also discounted the work of most foreign-born Asians and discredited the bicultural tension that often does surface in literature by both immigrant and American-born writers. Amy Ling, for example, notes that Chinese American women are frequently caught “between worlds”: “Their facial features proclaim one fact – their Asian ethnicity – but by education, choice, or birth they are American” (1990, 20). Ling acknowledges the reality of a double consciousness in the writers she analyzes. The writers examined in *Articulate Silences* likewise draw freely from Asian and Anglo-American traditions, as I demonstrate, “but refuse to be defined or confined by either” (1993, 170).

Elaine H. Kim, author of the ground-breaking work of criticism in the field, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (1982), explains in her foreword to *Reading the Literatures of Asian America* (Lim and Ling 1992) why cultural nationalism was important to her earlier conception of Asian American literature and why that conception should now be revised:
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In the late 1970s . . . I sought delimitations, boundaries, and parameters because I felt they were needed to establish the fact that there was such a thing as Asian American literature . . . That is why cultural nationalism has been so crucial. . . . Insisting on a unitary identity seemed the only effective means of opposing and defending oneself against marginalization. . . . Yet Asian American identities have never been exclusively racial. (1992, xi–xii; emphasis added)

Adverting to race alone also obscures the variety of generational and ethnic constituencies within Asian American communities. The fluctuating parameters of this literature reflect this complexity. Largely as a result of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which abolished quotas favoring northwestern European nations, the number of Asian immigrants has risen so sharply that it is no longer practical to stress American nativity as the sine qua non for Asian American sensibility. As the label “Asian American” stretches to accommodate new subgroups, so does Asian American literature, which has now broadened to include writings by Americans of Bangladeshi, Burmese, Cambodian, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Indian, Indonesian, Laotian, Nepali, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Thai, and Vietnamese descent.2

Cultural nationalism, far from being dissipated by growing heterogeneity, has taken plural forms. Ethnic and regional groups formerly eclipsed by the critical focus on Chinese and Japanese American writers on the West Coast are beginning to call for specific forms of cultural alliances. Oscar Campomanes advocates a historical and literary paradigm specific to Philippine writings in English, one that takes into account the experience of direct colonization by the United States (1992). Naheed Islam protests against the homogenization of diverse groups and the domination of Indian Americans within the “South Asian” category: “But why would I be South Asian when I could be Bangladeshi? And the Tripuras, Shantals and Chakmas living within the borders of Bangladesh, brutally suppressed by the military, may choose to distinguish their identity from that nation-state” (242). Elaine Kim stresses the importance of Korean political and cultural solidarity during the 1991 Los Angeles uprising: “Korean national consciousness, the resolve to resist and fight back when threatened with extermination, was all that could be called upon when the Korean Americans in Los Angeles found themselves abandoned” (1993, 229). Stephen Sumida points out the need for a separate critical lens to bring out the inextricability of history and place in the local literature of Hawai’i: “History and place are not simply two separate elements. . . . [I]n Hawai’i’s island culture place is conceived as history – that is, as the story enacted on any given site” (1992, 216). Still others are contesting for the recognition of writers “East of California” (title of a
conference at Cornell in 1991), such as those from the Midwest and the East Coast. However, even scholars who insist on the distinctness of each Asian subgroup recognize the importance of interethnic cohesion. Thus, although E. San Juan, Jr., urges Filipino Americans to assert “autonomy from the sweeping rubric of ‘Asian American,’” he also concedes the importance of uniting with other Asians for “common political demands” (1994, 206). Similarly, despite Islam’s annoyance with the “South Asian” tag, she “continue[s] to work with others of South Asian descent on certain issues” (244). Without such broader consortium the voice of each sector would remain inaudible in America.

Sau-ling Cynthia Wong uses an incident prior to the 1990 census to epitomize Asian Americans’ need to remain both culturally distinct and politically unified. When the Bureau of the Census proposed to dispense with the listing of different ethnicities by lumping them together under the category of “Asian or Pacific Islander,” diverse Asian Americans vehemently opposed the idea: “they united with each other in order to protect their separate interests” (1993, 7). But Wong herself goes beyond championing solidarity on just the political front. In Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance, she attempts to forge a “textual coalition” across different national literatures, arguing that although Asian American writers, like their “mainstream” counterparts, evoke common literary motifs such as food, the doppelgänger, mobility, and art, “Asian American deployments of [these motifs], when contextualized and read intertextually, form distinctive patterns” within themselves (1993, 12). These patterns, according to Wong, are rooted in the race-specific American historical experience of people of Asian descent. Wong’s book represents a valiant and ambitious critical effort to build an Asian American literary network, though some will quarrel with her focus on what Campomanes calls “U.S.-centric narrations” (see Chapter 2).

“Asian American panethnicity” (to borrow Yen Le Espiritu’s term) is undoubtedly crucial to our political visibility. Conscious as most Asian Americans are about their ethnic differences from one another, they still look very much alike to the larger American populace, and they still confront hate-crimes perpetrated indiscriminately against them by those unable or unwilling to make distinctions. (In the now notorious case of Vincent Chin, a Chinese American was mistaken for a Japanese autoworker and was clubbed to death with a baseball bat in Detroit.) As Victor Bascara puts it, “It is this ignorance and prejudice that makes for some semblance of an Asian American collectivity forged by racism” (8). But a literary collectivity is a different matter. Trying to link the literatures of historically, culturally, and linguistically diverse ethnic groups will become increasingly straining as these communities multiply.
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Nevertheless, one must not overlook the interdependence of politics and literature. Without the initial naming, subsequent institutionalizing, and continuous contestation over this literature, the many voices that are now being heard might have remained mute. Perhaps the most important reason to maintain the designation of “Asian American” literature is not the presence of any cultural, thematic, or poetic unity but the continuing need to amplify marginalized voices, however dissimilar.

AMERICAN, ASIAN, ASIAN AMERICAN

Historically, the appellation “Oriental” was used in North America both for peoples across the Pacific and for Asian inhabitants of the “New World.” “Asian American,” on the other hand, accentuates the American status of immigrants from Asia and their descendants. The term grows out of the frustration felt by many American-born citizens of Asian extraction at being treated as perpetual foreigners in the United States despite the fact that their roots in this country go back as many as seven generations. Such racist treatment, along with Orientalist tendencies that fetishize Asian objects, customs, and persons, has also engendered in many Asian Americans an internal ambivalence about their Asian heritage. Because of the dominant perception that what constitutes “American” is white, mainstream, and Western, the desire to reclaim a distinctive ethnic tradition seems forever at odds with the desire to be recognized as fully “American.”

The most glaring example of the danger of lumping Asians and Americans of Asian ancestry together was the internment of people of Japanese descent in both the United States and Canada during World War II, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The American and Canadian governments not only refused to distinguish between Japanese people and those of Japanese descent born or residing permanently in North America, but also conflated national and cultural allegiances. In the United States, after war was declared with Japan, Japanese Americans on the West Coast who observed Japanese customs or religions, who organized social functions for the ethnic community, or who engaged in Japanese art or literature became the FBI’s prime suspects. Many families, in order to avoid being incriminated, destroyed nearly everything associated with their culture of origin, from heirlooms and artwork to books, manuscripts, and diaries written in Japanese. The self-hatred induced by the psychic strain of being denied American civil rights and of having to choose between being Japanese and being American are graphically depicted in John Okada’s No-No Boy, which, in Gayle K. Fujita Sato’s words, “attempts to affirm ‘Japanese American’ through a character who rejects everything Japanese” (1992, 239). Japanese Canadians fared no
better. Joy Kogawa, author of *Obasan* and *It'suka* (both of which deal with the Japanese Canadian internment and its aftermath), discloses in an interview that after the war Japanese Canadians similarly tried to distance themselves from their ethnicity: “We learned to shun one another and to view any Japanese-Canadian gathering as a gaggle of ghettoized geese” (1985, 60).4

It is therefore not surprising that writing by Asian Americans has coalesced around the theme of “claiming an American, as opposed to Asian, identity” (E. Kim 1987, 88). This imperative accounts for the deliberate omission of the hyphen among most Asian American intellectuals. In Maxine Hong Kingston’s words, “We ought to leave out the hyphen in ‘Chinese-American,’ because the hyphen gives the word on either side equal weight. . . . Without the hyphen, ‘Chinese’ is an adjective and ‘American’ a noun; a Chinese American is a type of American” (1982, 60). This desire to be recognized as American has sometimes been achieved at the expense of Asian affiliation. The obsessive desire to claim America has induced a certain cultural amnesia regarding the country of ancestral origin. In Kingston’s *China Men* – a book admittedly designed to “claim America” – the narrator puzzles over her father’s reluctance to divulge his past: “Do you mean to give us a chance at being real Americans by forgetting the Chinese past?” (14). Her question, which implies that jettisoning Asian cultural baggage augments a Chinaman’s chance of being acknowledged as a “real” American, explodes the myth of a pluralist country.

Children of immigrants are perhaps made even more acutely aware of their ethnic differences. The pain of maintaining traditional Asian customs is evoked in Chitra Divakaruni’s poem “Yuba City School” (in northern California). The speaker’s son – who has long hair in keeping with Sikh customs – is mercilessly harassed by his classmates: “In the playground. . . . invisible hands snatch at his uncut hair,/unseen feet trip him from behind,/and when he turns, ghost laughter/all around his bleeding knees” (80). He is also repeatedly called “idiot” on account of his broken English, his second language (79). Even American-born Asians are not immune to linguistic self-doubts, however, as intimated in Chang-rae Lee’s *Native Speaker*, in which the fully acculturated Korean American protagonist observes wryly that people like him are “always thinking about still having an accent” (11). Many people of Asian descent feel, to this day, the need to prove their Americanness by shedding their originary culture and by setting themselves apart from new Asian immigrants. Though different sensibilities admittedly characterize the American-born and the foreign-born, insistence on American nativity can result in the double exclusion of current Asian immigrants – by non-Asians and by American-born Asians alike.
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Both the altered demography in recent years and the prominence of some immigrant writers are beginning to unfix the border of Asian American literature. In Elaine Kim’s words, “The lines between Asian and Asian American, so important to identity formation in earlier times, are increasingly being blurred” (1992, xiii). The 1965 change in the immigration quota has resulted in the number of foreign-born Asians now exceeding that of the American-born. Asian American literature has been enriched by the voices of writers of diverse ethnic origins. Especially notable is the emergence of South Asian and Southeast Asian American authors, including Wendy Law-Yone (Burmese); Agha Shahid Ali, Meena Alexander, and Bharati Mukherjee (Indian); Bapsi Sidhwa and Sara Suleri (Pakistani); Rienzi Cruz and Michael Ondaatje (Sri Lankan); Cecilia Brainard, Jessica Hagedorn, and Ninotchka Rosca (Filipino); Le Ly Hayslip, Jade Ngoc Quang Huỳnh, and Nguyễn Quí Đúc (Vietnamese); and S. P. Somtow and Wanwadee Larsen (Thai). The competing impulses of claiming America and maintaining ties with Asia are especially pronounced among some of these immigrants. Mukherjee believes that such authors should draw on their American experience instead of writing as expatriates and indulging in nostalgia: “Immigration is the opposite of expatriation. . . . I’ve come to see expatriation as the great temptation, even the enemy, of the ex-colonial, once-third-world author. . . . Turn your attention to this [American] scene, which has never been in greater need for new perspectives” (Mukherjee 1988, 28–9).

Hagedorn takes the opposite view: “I’m not interested in just writing ‘an American novel.’ . . . Though I’ve been living in America for 30 years now, my roots remain elsewhere . . . back there” (Hagedorn 1994, 181). Nguyễn, who has spent two decades in America, likewise identifies himself as a Vietnamese man, because “A psychological sense of home is the most important sense of home” (Vinh 1994, 1). Alexander describes herself in Fault Lines as “a woman cracked by multiple migrations,” who is impelled to revisit figuratively “all the cities and small towns and villages” in which she has lived to come to terms with her fragmented life history (2–3).

Even some American-born Asians who grew up trying to distance themselves from their originary cultures have begun to take renewed interest in their Asian legacy. The protagonist in Peter Bacho’s Cebu shuttles between the Philippines and the United States; both his visit to his “motherland” and his return to Seattle are fraught with unpleasant surprises. In Turning Japanese David Mura chronicles his literal and psychological odyssey of coming to terms with his ethnicity. In his own words: “Up until my late twenties, I mainly attempted to avoid dealing with my sansei identity, and tended to think of myself as a middle class white person. The result . . . was self-hatred and self-abuse. . . . If I had
not become self-conscious about my identity, I might have destroyed myself” (1994, 187).

Clearly the Asian American movement, together with the recent emphasis on multiculturalism, has been inspiring Americans of Asian descent to explore their composite heritage. Cultural criticism is undergoing corresponding changes, and the terms of what constitutes “America” are being re-visioned in the light of its multicolored citizenry. Some scholars, mindful that many Asians have settled in North America not necessarily by choice but because of political instability (not infrequently caused by U.S. interventions) in their Asian homelands, have gone as far as to deny the United States as the psychic center for Asian Americans and to embrace instead a “diasporic” or “exilic” identity. In addition, writers and critics who view Asia and Asian America conjunctively are exploring the relationship between Asian American and postcolonial studies, especially with regard to such countries as India, Korea, Vietnam, and the Philippines.6

The new diasporic emphasis coincides with growing interest in Asian American literature among overseas scholars as well as with deepening interest in East Asia among scholars in the United States. An organization called the Asian American Literature Association was founded in Japan in 1989; the inaugural issue of its publication, the AALA Journal, appeared in 1994. A conference on Chinese American literature has been sponsored biennially since 1993 by the Institute of European and American Studies, Academia Sinica, in Taiwan; selected papers are published in an anthology (in Chinese) after each conference. Journals such as Muac: A Journal of Transcultural Production and Positions: Each Asia Cultures Critique, which are based in the United States, cover cultural and political events in the “Asian diaspora” and feature work by writers and artists on both sides of the Pacific. These trends point to strengthening ties between Asia and Asian America as well as the internationalization of Asian American literary studies.7

Although excited by these new critical currents in Asian American literary studies, I hold with Sau-ling Wong that the shift from claiming America to writing diaspora should not be seen as a “teleological” progression (Wong 1995b, 17). When I first entered the field almost a decade ago as a foreign-born Asian, I felt at times like an interloper because American nativity was so central to the definition of Asian American literature. As the voices of immigrant writers become more prominent and as critical paradigms change to accommodate these new voices, my bicultural training is increasingly germane to my teaching and research. Although I take issue with the editors of The Big Aiiiiieeeet! for valorizing the Asian heroic tradition (see next section), I appreciate their effort to look beyond European American traditions for influences that have
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shaped Asian American writing. I also enjoy the opportunity to revisit Chinese classics – which were never a part of my American university education – in my work on Chinese American literature.

Nevertheless, I am aware that the current emphasis on diaspora has uneven material consequences for people who have lived and studied on different continents and for people who were born and raised in North America. I am less certain how American-born Asians – the very people who spearheaded Asian American studies in defiance of their political and cultural invisibility – can avail themselves of a diasporic identity. For instance, though bilingualism is undeniably a valuable asset in tackling Asian American literature, it is disturbing to see some highly qualified American-born candidates being denied teaching jobs on the ground that they are not fluent in any Asian languages. Many of these candidates, growing up in the United States or Canada, were never encouraged or given adequate opportunity to learn their ancestral tongue(s). Furthermore, if American-born Asians discriminate against so-called FOBs (Fresh-off-the-Boats), some new immigrants from professional classes also tend to look down on the less privileged old-timers and their monolingual children and to distance themselves from community involvement generally. Thus while I welcome the growing recognition of the crossover between Asia and Asian America – a crossover that permits a more fluid sense of identity – I believe Asian American literary studies must also keep alive the impetus to claim America. Otherwise the field may swing from excluding the voices of immigrants to marginalizing those of American-born Asians.

Unlike Sau-ling Wong, who suggests that a “location” or “nation” must be the focal point for any political struggle (1995b, 19), or Shirley Lim, who argues from the opposite viewpoint that the effort to “claim America” only spurs assimilation into the majority culture and feeds American national pride and prejudice (see Chapter 9), I believe that we can both “claim America” – assert and manifest the historical and cultural presence of Asians in North America – and use our transnational consciousness to critique the polity, whether of an Asian country, Canada, the United States, or Asian America. Individuals may feel empowered by an ethnic American identity, by a diasporic identity, or by both, but the field of Asian American literary studies can certainly afford to incorporate these divergent perspectives. An Asian American consciousness fueled by the urge to claim America has allowed some writers to rupture a racist and patriarchal definition of an American national identity (see Lowe 1995). Similarly, an exilic or diasporic identity can enable others to contest the exclusiveness of state or cultural nationalism. To reckon with these sometimes contradictory stances is not to take refuge in a postmodern protean identity that flits from one location to the next, but
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to make room for reciprocal critique and multiple commitments. Straddling these positions may involve painful alienation that renders oneself ill at ease within one’s own communities. But assuming such vantage points also makes it possible to rally around our concerns as an ethnic minority in North America while avoiding the pitfalls of chauvinism and separatism that can at times accompany unconditional national allegiances. To my mind, the works of Meena Alexander, Peter Bacho, Marilyn Chin, Jade Ngoc Quang Huỳnh, Younghill Kang, Fae Ng, and Wendy Law-Yone, for example, often exemplify the simultaneous claiming and disclaiming of both Asia and America.

RACE, GENDER, SEXUALITY, CLASS

From the beginning, race and gender have been intertwined in Asian American history and literature. The editors of *Aiiiiiiiiiiel* considered “emasculating” to be one of the most damaging stereotypes about Asian Americans: “Good or bad, the stereotypical Asian is nothing as a man. At worst, the Asian-American is contemptible because he is womanly, effeminate, devoid of all the traditionally masculine qualities of originality, daring, physical courage, and creativity” (Chin et al. 1974/1983, xxx). The editors saw this affront as bound up with language and culture: “The deprivation of language in a verbal society like this country’s has contributed to the lack of a recognized Asian American cultural integrity . . . and the lack of a recognized style of Asian-American manhood” (xxxviii). Outraged by Hollywood’s representation of Asian Americans as either sinister or subservient, they resolved to invent a form of ethnopoetics that is specifically masculine.

This androcentric solution to racist representation was bound to be challenged sooner or later. The catalyst came in the form of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1976), the first Asian American work to receive astounding national acclaim. “The literary decade which had begun on a note of brash machismo with the liberating outcry from the editors of *Aiiiiiiiiiiel* . . . ended on a deeply plangent note of powerful feminist independence and literary vision,” Garrett Hongo observed (1993, xxix–xxx). Yet *The Woman Warrior* was severely attacked by Frank Chin, who accused Kingston of falsifying Chinese myths and catering to a racist white audience in the name of feminism. The ensuing pen war that raged between the defenders of Kingston on the one side and Chin and his supporters on the other became one of the most protracted and notorious in the field.

Feminist critics such as Elaine Kim, Shirley Lim, Sau-ling Wong, and myself have taken the *Aiiiiiiiiiiel* editors to task for their preoccupation with reasserting Asian American manhood, their classification of desir-