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Edited by Rajini Srikanth and Min Hyoungh Song

Excerpt

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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

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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,

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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."<sup>3</sup> 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

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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.”<sup>4</sup> 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.”<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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

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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.<sup>7</sup> 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."<sup>8</sup> 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

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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”<sup>9</sup> and doing so in “an American language that has Chinese accents.”<sup>10</sup>

### 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.”<sup>13</sup> 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

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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.”<sup>14</sup> The emphasis in this soliloquy is on how language has shaped,



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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.<sup>15</sup>

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.



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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."<sup>16</sup> 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

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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.