Introduction: Asian American Literature in Transition, 1850–1930
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The late nineteenth and early twentieth century represent a unique challenge to Asian North American literary scholars. Given the various obstacles that immigrants from Asia had to overcome in order to enter the United States, the political oppression, economic hardships, and social ostracism they endured when they arrived, and the xenophobic expectations of a publishing industry and reading public eager to proliferate stories of the “yellow peril,” it is easy to understand why fewer Asian-authored literary texts were published in the United States and Canada during this time and, perhaps, easy to dismiss these years as relatively unimportant to Asian American literary history. Indeed, while most people probably think of Asian North American literature as developing in the mid-twentieth century, the chapters collected here argue for the importance of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century in understanding Asian American and Asian Canadian identities as national and transnational formations. The different kinds of writing produced in this period – including fiction, poetry, autobiography, journalism, and drama – manifest the complex and dynamic nature of Asian American and Asian Canadian identities: as excluded aliens, as subjects of empire, as racialized labor, as gendered and sexualized bodies. This volume thus places a new pressure on the basic assumptions of Asian North American literary history as well as revealing exciting new dimensions on writing and culture from the mid-nineteenth century to the Great Depression.

Nations and Empires
The eighty years that this volume encompasses were a time of shifting anxieties within the United States and Canada about how to define their citizens at home and their imperial role overseas. As Rajini Srikanth and Min Song note in their introduction to The Cambridge History of Asian American Literature (2015), Asian American literature “hinge[s] on the
political” to an extent that is difficult to match in other literary traditions and histories because the texts that comprise it have always “challenge[d] their relegation to the margins” of history and politics. If we accept this premise of literary production as a way of negotiating historical exigencies, then it seems fair to say that this early period of Asian North American literary production “hinges” on the political more than any other that followed. The chapters in this volume take up this case more robustly, but the reasons can be enumerated briefly here. For one thing, the years between 1850 and 1930 witnessed the first notable migration and immigration of people from East Asia and South Asia to North America. While these numbers were relatively fractional in comparison with the overall US population at the time (according to the Census Bureau, Asians never constituted more than 0.4 percent of the nation’s population during this time period), they had an outsized impact on US policy as well as state and local laws regarding not only citizenship and immigration but also miscegenation, property ownership, housing, and zoning.

In the case of Chinese migrants, who made up most of Asian migration to North America, their arrival in the United States and Canada was driven by the economic and political instability of China itself (an instability that the United States and European nations exacerbated and then exploited), as well as the need within the United States and Canada for cheap labor to maintain economic growth and satisfy their territorial ambitions. At the same time that the United States was experiencing the arrival of what Supreme Court Justice John Marshall Harlan, in his famous dissent of _Plessy v. Ferguson_ (1896), called a “race so different from our own,” it was still working out how to incorporate African Americans (who had been emancipated after centuries of chattel slavery), Native Americans (whose removal had been a cornerstone of US nationhood), and the much larger number of immigrants arriving from central and eastern Europe. The increasing identification of Asians – particularly the Chinese – as the “yellow peril” resulted in a slew of US federal acts (the Chinese Exclusion Acts of 1882 and 1892, the Page Act of 1875, the Gentleman’s Agreement of 1907, and the Johnson–Reed Act of 1924) that made it extremely difficult for Chinese and other Asian nationals to enter, live, or work in the United States. The 1917 Immigration Act, for example, established restrictions that affected all immigration into the United States from the “Asiatic Barred Zone,” which included the entirety of the Indian subcontinent as well as East Asia. The Supreme Court, in cases such as _Ozawa v. United States_ (1922) and _United States v. Thind_ (1923), cemented the notion that US
citizenship was reserved for whites and that all “Asians” – no matter skin color or ethnic origin – were perpetual aliens in America. The Canadian government also passed a series of laws barring Chinese immigration into that country, including the Chinese Head Tax of 1885 (meant to deter the immigration of laborers by charging prohibitive fees for Chinese seeking to enter Canada) and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1923, as well as legislation that severely restricted the migration of East Indians in 1908. The targeting of particular national or ethnic groups quickly led to broader racial exclusions that encompassed East Asia and South Asia. The sizeable Punjabi Sikh community in British Columbia established in the first decade of the twentieth century experienced intense discrimination and anti-Indian legislation, including the 1908 continuous journey regulation that directly aimed at preventing Sikhs from entering Canada via Hong Kong or Japan.

At the same time that the United States and Canada were attempting to impose a domestic racialized order (buttressed by emergent scientific discourses, such as eugenics, that biologized racial difference), both countries were beginning to assert themselves internationally. As a British colony until 1931, Canada was part of a global system that simultaneously necessitated and obstructed the movement of laborers and other diasporic subjects between various outposts of the empire. Within the US context, the advent of workers, students, travelers, and officials from China, Korea, Japan, India, and the Philippines was partly the result of the United States establishing and protecting its economic and military interests in Asia, the Pacific, and the Caribbean. Migrants from Asia arrived at the same time that the United States was looking to flex its influence and power overseas. In thinking about the presence of Asians in North America during the time period of this volume, questions of empire – whether couched in terms of American political, economic, military, or cultural influence in Asia and the Pacific, or Canada’s position as a destination for the colonizers and the colonized of British imperialism – are central. The fact that both the United States and Canada were in the process of cementing their own national identities and domestic spaces while at the same time projecting themselves into “foreign” spaces requires an analysis of Asian North American cultural production that accounts for not only the “domestic” politics of the nation but also the global histories of empire. Amy Kaplan notes in her influential work *The Anarchy of Empire* (2005) that “representations of national identity” in early twentieth-century American literature and culture “are informed and deformed by the anarchic encounters of empire, even as those same representations displace and disavow imperialism as something remote and foreign.”

Asian North
American literature – and particularly Asian American literature – by and large does not displace or disavow the imperialism that most Americans would never acknowledge.

The historical period given in our title marks an editorially convenient but in many ways arbitrary cut-off for this volume’s concerns, for the issues of national identity, immigration, labor, law, capital, empire, and culture described here do not begin in 1850 and end in 1930, nor does literary and cultural representation map neatly on to the historical events in this timespan. Nonetheless, what marks the approach of each of these chapters is a preoccupation with both the historical moment and its afterlife of the cultural texts that we today call “Asian North American.”

The Problem of Early Asian North American Literature

This volume continues a longstanding conversation within the field surrounding the place and meaning of “early” Asian North American literary production. Elaine Kim’s groundbreaking Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context (1982) briefly surveys early autobiographical writing by Asian Americans such as Lee Yan Phou, New Il-Han, and Etsu Sugimoto, and more recent foundational books by Robert Lee, Colleen Lye, Josephine Park, and Viet Nguyen also have devoted considerable space to pre-1930s literary history. Essay collections like Re/collecting Early Asian America: Essays in Cultural History (2002), edited by Josephine Lee, Imogene L. Lim, and Yuko Matsukawa, and Recovered Legacies: Authority and Identity in Early Asian American Literature (2005), edited by Keith Lawrence and Floyd Cheung, have been mainstays in early Asian American literary studies. Srikanth and Song’s Cambridge History of Asian American Literature includes chapters on early Chinese American autobiographies, nineteenth-century theatrical orientalism, the Angel Island poems, and the Eaton sisters as well as subsequent periods of Asian American literature. Along with these volumes, scholars such as Yu-Fang Cho, Denise Cruz, Dominika Ferens, Hsuan L. Hsu, Helen Jun, Julia H. Lee, and Edlie Wong have written monographs focusing exclusively on this early time period, emphasizing the longue durée of Asian North American literary production and its intersections with other areas of cultural studies. Overall, however, it is apparent that the late nineteenth and early twentieth century simply does not generate as much critical scholarship as do later periods of Asian American literary history. Most full-length studies of Asian American or Asian...
Canadian literature, even if they do acknowledge that writers of Asian descent existed well before the identity-based and cultural nationalist movements of the late 1960s, do not delve into this time period at all.

This relative critical silence should not be read as a sign of inconsequentiality. Rather, we would argue that the questions that are posed of this earlier period – in this volume and others – are fundamental and, perhaps, the most troublesome for Asian North American literary and cultural studies. These key questions ask readers and critics alike to confront the constructed nature of academic knowledge, the difficulty of reconstructing and representing literary subjects, bodies, and experiences, and the ways that works produced in earlier periods do not tend to conform politically, aesthetically, and materially to understandings of “Asian North America” in the early twenty-first century. As several of our authors acknowledge, what counts as “Asian American literature” or “Asian Canadian literature” is based on the presumptions of the late twentieth century and these terms must be severely tested in applying them to works of this period. Literature of this early period has too frequently been read as a way of discussing nascent post-1965 preoccupations: claiming distinctively American or Canadian national identities, replacing negative stereotypes with heroic models of racial and gender behavior, manifesting radical politics and racial solidarity. This too only feeds a kind of “presentist” bias that sees the past as backward and the consciousness of early writers as important only insofar as they can be understood as evolving toward a more self-conscious and progressive here and now.

This predilection has led to the limited selection of certain writers as role models for contemporary Asian North American writing and the exclusion of others. The scholarly preference for the “good” Edith Eaton/ Sui Sin Far over the “bad” sister, Winnifred Eaton/Ônoto Watanna, as Tomo Hattori has suggested, is probably the best-known example. Furthermore, even though Edith Eaton has been hailed as perhaps the best-known early Asian North American writer, her œuvre has often been understood in nation-based terms that omit those circum-Atlantic and circum-Pacific stories outside the neat conceptions of prototypical Asian North American authors. Literary works that somehow do not align with late twentieth-century notions of “Asian American” or “Asian Canadian” identity and politics have tended to be left out of these literary histories precisely because they are not easily categorized into the “resistance” and “accommodation” binary that critics have relied upon since the field was founded.

New Directions

Asian American Literature in Transition, 1850–1930 attempts to remedy some of those critical oversights by introducing alternative and emerging theoretical frameworks for thinking about race more broadly and Asian North American literary representation more specifically. Like those of other volumes in this series, it partakes of recent critical conversations that aim to rethink the foundations and parameters of Asian North American literary and cultural studies. A major focus of this volume is to analyze and resituate texts that sometimes do not quite fit the longstanding conventions of what has been thought to be Asian North American literary production; it offers key examples, historical contextualization, and different strategies for reading works that have been by and large passed over, neglected, or read in predictable ways. Even those chapters that focus on canonical authors (such as Edith Eaton, who has long been recognized as one of the central writers in the Asian North American literary canon) or works (such as the Angel Island poems) approach these seemingly familiar figures and texts in radically new ways. In the case of Eaton, scholars Yu-Fang Cho, Edlie Wong, and Hsuan L. Hsu shift attention away from her well-known Chinatown stories to works which are set on the fringes of the United States (Alaska) and the British empire (Jamaica) and populated by characters of indeterminate racial identity. Dominika Ferens reads the fiction of Eaton and her sister Winnifred through the lens of affect theory, making the case that an attentiveness to the narration of such subjective experiences can not only reveal to us a “seismographic record of emotions” but also provide a transcript of the social conditions that cause such emotions in the first place. By readjusting our readerly expectations, we are not only more attentive to the way any Asian American or Asian Canadian story is told, we are also about to access what Stephen Sohn has called “the fictional worlds that radically widen the social contexts of Asian American cultural productions.”

The chapters in this volume are united in rethinking Asian North American literary study of this early period, but they go about this intellectual project in strikingly diverse ways. What are the different forms that Asian American and Asian Canadian cultural expression take, and how do these various forms challenge received narratives of racial difference? How does an approach that emphasizes alternative kinds of spaces (empire, hemispheric, the frontier) impact our understanding of Asian North American literature of this time period? How can we understand Asian North American performance in an age in which representations of...
yellowface or blackface were widely popular? What does it mean to apply contemporary notions of Asian American racial formation to earlier moments in time that constructed such social identities very differently? What would it mean to Asian North American literary history if we were to push back against the notion that the Angel Island poems or the writings of the Eaton sisters represent its only originating points?

In attempting to answer these questions, the chapters in this volume envision communities and identities that are both transnational as well as transpacific. They consider specific spaces in the United States and British empire within an ecocritical frame. They question national discourses of belonging in the United States and Canada, recognizing that during this early literary period the national boundaries between the United States and Canada were more porous and travel across these borders by authors of Asian ancestry was quite frequent. Both Edith and Winnifred Eaton, for instance, lived and wrote in Canada and the United States as well as in other locales. However, our decision to use the term “Asian North American” in this volume reflects more than the permeability of the physical US–Canadian border in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It acknowledges that both US and Canadian works are key to understanding this early period of literary and cultural production. It also reflects the turn within both Asian American and Asian Canadian studies toward the diasporic and the transnational and away from the traditional narratives of assimilation and “claiming” a monolithic national identity. Despite different national histories of racial exclusion and violence, Iyko Day points out the similar trajectory that Asian racialization has taken in Canada and the United States from “yellow peril to model minority,” despite the absence in Canada of a historical “regime of plantation-based slavery” (an indicator in her mind that Asian racialization is not wholly explained by anti-black racism and that it exceeds a strictly US or Canadian national framework). Giving way to anxieties that “Asian North American” might become simply a catch-all term, “fraught with implications of US cultural imperialism,” can inadvertently foster a US-centric focus as well as limit the extent to which we might understand, as Day notes, the “corresponding histories of labor exploitation, exclusion laws, and disenfranchisement, and internment [that] have provided a material basis for a diasporic alliance between these panethnic configurations.”

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time period, remaining skeptical of the desire (defensiveness, Colleen Lye might say) for Asian North American identity and literature to conform to a cohesive narrative. By emphasizing authors of South Asian descent, several of our chapters broaden the scope of Asian North American identity beyond its previous emphasis on migration from East Asia, while still recognizing past and present discontinuities among different ethnic communities. It also reassesses the boundaries defining what counts as Asian North American literature or culture. As Julia H. Lee’s chapter mentions, there is “a prevailing critical narrative of American literary history that tends to characterize late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American literature as empty of Asian American literary production” because it is unable to look beyond textual inscription, paper record, or linguistic feature to understand the presence of Asian immigrant or sojourner subjects in North America. Several of our chapters highlight how contemporary paradigms of identity, authorship, and voice have long been used to exclude certain kinds of works from inclusion in literary anthologies and in curricula. Among these exclusions are literary and dramatic works by those who might be thought of as sojourners, such as Yone Noguchi or Hong Shen, whose fame in their home country seems to disqualify them for consideration under an Asian North American lens. Others, such as Winnifred Eaton or Sadakichi Hartmann, produced a body of orientalist works that, at least on the surface, clearly catered to white racial fantasies. A highly developed discourse of what Josephine Lee calls “decorative orientalism” – which operated both contrary to and in conjunction with the idea of the “yellow peril” – was crucial in explaining how the United States and Canada conceived Asian nations and their inhabitants. That Asian North American authors as well as non-Asian ones performed (and continue to perform) what might be seen as acts of yellowface registers the lingering legacies of orientalism and its entangled structure with other deeply rooted forms of racial representation such as blackface minstrelsy. Finally, works translated from other languages, such as Japanese (the focus of Andrew Way Leong’s chapter), have only begun to be considered and made available as part of the body of works seen as the Asian North American canon.

Our volume emphasizes Asian North American literature as a capacious and porous category that includes not only fiction, essays, and poetry, but also journalism, letters, and plays; it also looks at cultural representations – for instance, stage productions, silent films, and celebrity images – beyond the printed word. Its chapters give a sense of how diverse the literary and cultural forms, genres, practices, and productions of this period were. If
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early Asian North American literature represented a diversity of forms and themes—a Cambrian explosion of subjectivities, identities, performances, and forms—these studies wrestle with how best to frame and interpret these myriad texts, the complicated conditions under which different works were produced, and how these works continue to have representational force in the present.

The Chapters

Despite the enormous challenges that Asians living in the United States and Canada faced, they were still able to produce literary and cultural works, both in English and in their native languages, that explored their place within an increasingly multiracial and multiethnic nation and challenged the marginalization and exclusion that was often their lot. While the amount of writing produced by Asian North Americans in the nineteenth and early twentieth century may seem relatively small, one should not underestimate its importance in understanding Asian North American literature as a whole. In the case of the United States, literary and cultural texts set the terms for later critiques of US nation and imperialism, help in identifying and grappling with the gendering and racializing projects of US racist discourse (so important to post-1965 Asian American literature), and help us question the viability of the very notion of “Asian America.” This literary and cultural production also marked how social, political, and economic relationships with Asia—whether literal or imagined—were formative to the construction of nineteenth-century and modern national identities. Asians in North America were affected not only by the laws and ideologies of exclusion, but also by a long history of European and American orientalism that fantasized about the Asian racial “other” in diverse and complex ways. Thus early literature and culture reveals the active negotiation of the practice of labor and commodification in which Asian North Americans were engaged.

The works of the Eaton sisters are probably the best-known instances of “Asian North American writing”; however, as Edlie Wong and Hsuan L. Hsu point out, presentist preconceptions about what this term means heavily circumscribe what texts have traditionally been placed in that category. Edith Eaton, known for her essays and stories under the pseudonym of Sui Sin Far, championed Chinese immigrant characters and became, as Julia H. Lee has suggested, a “landmark in the narrative of Asian American studies.” However, she also published a considerable amount of fiction and nonfiction on other subjects and in settings outside...
of Chinatowns. As noted above, our volume includes several chapters reassessing Eaton’s work, two with a focus on the newspaper and magazine narratives by her that have recently been recovered and republished by Mary Chapman. Yu-Fang Cho, for instance, links some of these stories to Eaton’s better-known portrayals of Chinese characters, arguing for extending the commentary on Eaton’s racial and domestic North American representations of romance and maternity in order to speak to broader imperial and capitalist structures of racialization under Euro-American imperial dominance. As the chapters by Cho as well as Wong and Hsu suggest, these works cover a much broader geographical range and a much more complicated set of racial, imperial, and gendered/sexual interactions than is usually associated with her.

In questioning whether postcolonial studies continued the dominance of privileged Western intellectuals in representing colonized peoples, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously asked “Can the Subaltern Speak?” A related skepticism now tempers the ways in which contemporary Asian North American scholarship looks to the past. What are the processes by which certain kinds of historical subjects, whose ability to “speak” has been limited by time as well as circumstances of location and power, are selectively reconstructed? Many of our chapters note that at the heart of Asian North American literary and cultural work is a desire to understand the making of literature and culture as significant to the expression of a more radical Asian North American identity and as an act of self-empowerment. Several chapters directly address questions of speaking for the subject who has been erased from official records of the past. As Christopher Lee writes, figures like the Chinese railroad worker make their way into the present as part of a recuperative project that casts these men as figures of heroic nationalism. Lee is one of several authors here who look at how contemporary fictional or dramatic texts rewrite or restage the past. In her exploration of early anti-colonial writings by South Asian migrant workers, intellectuals, and students, Seema Sohi notes how the 1914 Komagata Maru incident was indeed a galvanizing force for activist writing by South Asians in the early twentieth century. That it remains so—and for non-South Asians as well—is evident in Nandi Bhatia’s comparison of two very different contemporary productions: Sharon Pollock’s 1976 The Komagata Maru Incident, recently restaged at Stratford in 2017, and Ajmer Rode’s 1979 Komagata Maru, which has played largely to community audiences in British Columbia and Punjab, India. Questions of self-representation also come up in Philippa Gates’s chapter on silent film, which not only highlights the cinematic versions of the “yellow peril” and