

Preface

AS PROFESSORS of Asian American literature, we quite naturally find satisfaction and purpose in Asian American literary scholarship: our own research projects engage and motivate us; we are revitalized through our scholarly dialogues and interactions with colleagues. But each of us, in our respective university and college assignments, is first and foremost a teacher. Our first thoughts are always for our students; and in the way we structure our courses, in the texts and authors we choose, and in the discussions and activities we build our classes around, we seek to engage our students, to challenge them, and to develop in them significant and lasting skills that will help them to negotiate literature and life.

In our Asian American literature courses, and especially in our survey courses, we have often lamented the dearth of approaches to or “ways of reading” the pioneer texts of Asian American literature—virtually all texts published before the late 1960s. We have also been troubled by the fact that insofar as theoretical approaches to early texts and authors do exist, they tend to polarize their subjects into “good” and “bad” or “real” and “fake” camps, sometimes quite casually dismissing a text or author for exhibiting the wrong politics, the wrong aesthetic, or the wrong tone. We have longed for approaches to early texts and authors that, through careful and clearheaded analysis, would not only define and explain fractures and flaws but would also engage texts and authors on their own terms and in ways that would fairly and logically reveal their strengths and contributions. This book, in large measure, represents an attempt to satisfy such longings.

To be sure, this book is directed to fellow scholars. But Asian American literature students, together with those who teach them, constitute our primary audience. Given our pedagogical aims, we have required contributors not only to maintain high standards of scholarship, originality, and sophistication, but also to write clearly and directly to our intended audience, avoiding unnecessary jargon and convoluted language. In our initial formulation of this project, in our selection of pre-1960s authors, and in our own editing of each article, we have had our

student audience in mind. We hope that through the perspectives and analyses afforded by this book, our fellow scholars—students as well as teachers—will discover new ways of looking at favorite texts and that, in some cases, they might adopt “neglected” texts as new favorites.

Certainly, there are omissions in our project. Difficult content decisions were made in line with our desire to put forward lesser known writers and texts. Satisfied that most of our readers would bring with them an appreciation of Sui Sin Far and Hisaye Yamamoto, for example, we elected not to “recover” such writers here. Otherwise, we have tried to represent major Asian American authors and texts before the 1960s, although constraints of space and time meant that deserving texts and writers would be left out and that some analyses would be curtailed. However, the analyses of texts and authors considered in this book also suggest approaches to works and writers we have been unable to include; and we trust our audience to find not only new applications for our ideas and those of our contributors, but other wonderful and productive ways of reading a large body of too-long-neglected works.

To our contributors, we owe our deepest gratitude for their generosity, intellect, loyalty, and patience. We would also like to thank our colleagues—known and anonymous—who have reviewed and nurtured our text through its various stages of development. We acknowledge the unflagging support of our editors at Temple University Press, especially David Palumbo-Liu, Janet Francendese, and William Hammell: they have improved the project with their incisive criticism and sustained us with their encouragement. Many of the articles in this collection began as papers sponsored by the Circle for Asian American Literary Studies (CAALS) and presented at annual conferences of the American Literature Association (ALA). We recognize the executive officers of the ALA—particularly Gloria Cronin and Alfred Bendixen—who helped lay the groundwork for this collection by supporting CAALS as a fledgling organization and by warmly encouraging our scholarly endeavors. We appreciate undergraduate and graduate research assistants who have assisted us with word processing and proofreading responsibilities—especially Cameron Pipkin, whose expert editorial guidance was all the more appreciated because it was voluntary. We are grateful for grants from our respective departments and colleges at Brigham Young University and Smith College and from the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation: these enabled us to do research, to write, to participate in conference activities related to this project, and to create and then sustain CAALS through its first years.

For their care and devotion, we thank our friends and families—all of whom we can acknowledge properly only by returning their love. We owe our fondest gratitude and our hearts to our respective best friends and companions Tracy and Sheri, who have sacrificed much so that *Recovered Legacies* could be compiled. To our students, we dedicate this volume.

Keith Lawrence and Floyd Cheung
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Introduction

KEITH LAWRENCE AND FLOYD CHEUNG

FOR MORE than a century, immigrants from various Asian countries and their descendants have made America their home. Throughout this time, writers whom we could call Asian American have expressed their joys, lamented their losses, crafted new forms, and imagined new worlds in their poetry, stories, novels, and plays. *Recovered Legacies: Authority and Identity in Early Asian American Literature*, which focuses on the period of Asian American literary history between roughly 1880 and 1965, assists in the recovery of the rich, diverse, and complicated writings of Asian American literary pioneers. We acknowledge, as Cary Nelson reminds us, that “literary history is never an innocent process of recovery. We recover what we are culturally and psychologically prepared to recover, and what we ‘recover’ we necessarily rewrite, giving it meanings that are inescapably contemporary, giving it a new discursive life” (1989, 11). Working at the dawn of the twenty-first century, our contributors and we recover and reassess many texts that have been ignored or denigrated by previous critics of Asian American literature. We have found that by approaching early texts with a wider range of expectations, paying close attention to the circumstances of their composition (including their original historical, social, and sometimes archival contexts) while applying traditional and recent critical theories to our readings of them, we have been able to rediscover what was valuable about the texts for their initial audiences as we infuse them with new discursive life for contemporary readers.

The subtitle of our volume would suggest that, from our perspective, affording new life to early Asian American literature is synonymous with establishing its authority and identity. We appreciate that *author* is the root of *authority*—and that both words derive from the Latin *auctor*, or “creator.” We wish to restore, in measure, the authority of (and for) early Asian American literary texts to the respective authors of these texts. One of our fundamental assumptions here is that every literary

text is engendered by unique circumstances—that, more precisely, these circumstances dictate how the author of a given text will shape it and what he or she will include in it. If the authority of (or for) this text is to be restored to its author—especially if the text is historically removed from us—we are thus obliged, as a point of departure, to re-create and understand the text’s engendering circumstances. The *identity* of a literary text, given connections of the word itself to the Latin *idem* (“same,” “consistent”) and *essentitas* (“being”), will derive, certainly, from these “engendering circumstances” as well as from the text’s self-contained structure and content. In this sense, the identity of a late nineteenth-century Asian American text should not depend (to put it bluntly) on the agenda of an early twenty-first-century reader. In emphasizing literary authority and identity, this volume contributes to the study of the “early” period of Asian American literary history in two ways: first, as a corrective to the presentist trend in existing scholarship, and second, as part of an effort to rethink why multicultural—in this case, Asian American—perspectives from the period matter.

TRANSCENDING PRESENTISM

As the recent publication of *Re/collecting Early Asian America* (Lee, Lim, and Matsukawa 2002) signals, the time has come to reconsider how we “recollect”—that is, how we select and remember—early Asian American cultural productions. One key historical marker for the work of Lee et al. is the same for us: the significance of 1965 as the year of the Hart-Celler Act, which mandated changes in the immigration quota system and consequently allowed for many more immigrants from Asian countries to enter the United States, thereby fundamentally changing the demographic composition of Asian America. Another date of importance for us is 1968, when students at San Francisco State University (joined by their peers at many other institutions) called for an end to U.S. military intervention in Vietnam as well as for reforms to an educational system that did not address their needs. Finally, the late 1960s saw the invention of the terms “Asian American” and “Asian American literature”; during this period, concerted efforts were made by Asian American writers and scholars, especially in California, to define, codify, and stimulate appreciation for Asian American literary production. These events help to make the late 1960s a watershed moment for Asian American literary studies. And as David Palumbo-Liu (1995) has pointed out, most scholarship has focused on literature following this moment—and indeed on

literature of the moment, a phenomenon he calls the “fetishization of the present” (qtd. in Chang 1996, xv). Overcoming or transcending such presentism depends on successfully meeting at least three challenges: to dismantle the resistance/accommodation model of the Asian American experience, to resist prescription while embracing dialogue, and to perceive America as (in Rémi Brague’s words [2002]) an “eccentric culture.”

Challenge 1: Dismantling the Resistance/Accommodation Model

We have been inspired by scholars of other ethnic American literatures as they have moved beyond the necessary and important work of canonizing so-called representative writers and texts to consider American multicultural production from new and more broadly developed perspectives on diversity and interconnectedness. We acknowledge, for example, the work of Kirsten Silva Gruesz (2001) on late nineteenth-century Latino writing, where she adeptly demonstrates how hitherto unknown Latino authors creatively engage not only the historical shifts in U.S.-Latin American relations but also such writers of the mainstream tradition as Whitman, Longfellow, and Bryant. While she pays careful attention to historical and materialist concerns, Gruesz works among a growing body of scholars who no longer choose to view their field solely through the binary lenses of resistance and accommodation, lenses worn by many late twentieth-century critics of ethnic American literature. Indeed, the resistance/accommodation model of Asian American experience is closely attached to present-centered Asian American literary and social theory. As one of our contributors, Viet Thanh Nguyen, argues in *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America*, “Resistance and accommodation are actually limited, polarizing options that do not sufficiently demonstrate the *flexible strategies* often chosen by authors and characters to navigate their political and ethical situations” (2002, 4; emphasis in original).

Collectively (and we are both oversimplifying and extrapolating Nguyen’s argument here), Gruesz (2001) and fellow scholars like Geneviève Fabre and Michel Feith (2002) and Craig Womack (1999) remind us that the resistance/accommodation model is problematic in two ways. First, it is clearly the product of its own era, measuring both “resistance” and “accommodation” by codified standards of the late twentieth century. Second, and more crucially, it measures (and again, only in codified ways) little more than how politically, emotionally, or socially active one is as an “American” or, in contradistinction to it,

an “ethnic American” of a particular type. Larger issues of one’s materialism, ideology, spirituality, aesthetics, biology, morality, culture, or sociality—of one’s identity and humanity—are thus misrepresented or altogether ignored. Take, for instance, the case of Edith and Winnifred Eaton, who wrote under the names of Sui Sin Far and Onoto Watanna at the beginning of the twentieth century.

A review of Sui Sin Far’s and Onoto Watanna’s differing receptions—past and present—provides insights into trends in Asian American literary criticism, especially a sense of how changing political priorities have affected the ways in which scholars interpret and evaluate the work of early figures. As one of the first authors to be recovered after the birth of the field in the 1960s, Sui Sin Far consistently has attracted scholarly attention, thus making her a particularly good case for our consideration. Writing for a range of newspapers and literary journals during the turn of the twentieth century, she published her only book-length work, a collection of short stories titled *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, in 1912. After her death in 1914, her literary reputation remained dormant until about 1970, when scholars in the field of Asian American studies began recovering her work. Initially, scholars celebrated her stories and other writings for reasons that made sense in the critical climate of the 1970s. Half English and half Chinese, Sui Sin Far, née Edith Eaton, chose to write under a Chinese pseudonym. Scholars interpreted this choice as brave, proud, and confident during an age when Sinophobia was dominant in America. Accordingly, they historicized Sui Sin Far as an early exemplar of the values they themselves advocated through the Asian American movement: greater ethnic pride and increased social accountability. In particular, they emphasized how Sui Sin Far’s protagonists—who were invariably likable and complex human individuals—countered negative stereotypes of Chinese as inhuman hordes. Following the success of *The Woman Warrior* in 1975, feminist critics searched for Maxine Hong Kingston’s (1975) antecedents to recover an Asian American women writers’ tradition; and not surprisingly, they identified Sui Sin Far as one of Kingston’s “literary grandmothers” (Ammons 1992, 60). Routinely throughout the 1970s and 1980s, critics and teachers compared her favorably with her sister, Winnifred Eaton, who chose to write under the pseudo-Japanese penname of Onoto Watanna at a time when Japan and things Japanese were positively viewed by most Americans. Thus, the narrative forwarded by such scholar-teachers posits that while Edith heroically emphasized her Chinese identity, Winnifred chose a much easier and more lucrative path, one that appeared to support

stereotypical notions of a problematically exotic and devious Japanese character. During the first period of recovery, in short, early authors were measured—and embraced or denounced—according to their apparent ethnic pride and ostensible resistance to negative stereotypes of Asians and Asian Americans.

In the past ten years, a body of criticism by a new generation of critics—including Yuko Matsukawa (1994), Min Song (1998), Dominka Ferens (2002), and our contributor David Shih—asks a different set of questions of both Sui Sin Far’s and Onoto Watanna’s writings: To what degree did these writers act as trickster figures? How do new theories of gender and sexuality afford fresh lenses through which to interpret their work? Does it matter that early writers sometimes positioned themselves as insiders when, in contrast to the Asian and Asian American communities about which they wrote, they were indeed outsiders by virtue of their class and mixed-race identities? In what ways did the demands of their publishers affect what they could write? What other constraints—and opportunities—attended their idiosyncratic careers?

As the example of the Eaton sisters’ reception demonstrates, scholars in the field of Asian American literature have begun to move from a compensatory to a transformative mode. During the first phase of recovery, Asian American literary critics tended to read early literature as either supportive or unsupportive of present-day political goals—and to advocate individual texts according to such readings. In a sense, these politically conscious, committed, and well-intentioned critics asked not what they could do for early Asian American literature but what early Asian American literature could do for them. More to the point, they asked which early figures anticipated the compensatory cultural work that they themselves sought to perform through their own criticism and teaching. While exceptions exist, only in the past decade have critics in the main begun to ask different and more open questions, approaching literature of the past with greater attention to original circumstances of production. For Sui Sin Far and Onoto Wantanna, especially, this work is well under way, but for many other early figures—some of whom are discussed in this volume—the work of transformative reassessment has just begun.

Challenge 2: Resisting Prescription and Embracing Dialogue

In *The City of Man* (1998), Pierre Manent satirically observes that relying on accepted scientific methodology, the scholar has virtually boundless freedom in setting up and developing arguments—especially given that

“he is methodologically exempt from connecting to other facts, which is to say from the whole of the human phenomenon,” so that he is “spared the sole true difficulty of knowledge.” Such scholars, Manent continues, tend to rely on interdisciplinary research, “as if the sum of the biases they profess could ever yield the unity of an impartial examination.” Indeed, such reliance stems in large part from a complicit understanding among disciplines about which rules may, with impunity, be broken—to the end that “‘interdisciplinary research’ is to scientific rigor what routing is to military discipline or a stampede to horsemanship” (111, 112). For Manent, there is an attendant scholarly problem, one centered in “the contrast found in the spirit of modern democracies between reforming activism under the banner of universal rights and scientific passivity in the name of cultural diversity.” The problem is not simply that the tension between scholarly passivity and action is finally unresolvable, but that asserting man as a cultural being in measure contradicts and is contradicted by asserting man as a being with rights (148, 149). Put differently, the doctrine of rights leads sociologists quite naturally to the doctrine of cultural diversity—but paradoxically makes full or genuine diversity impossible. Either this or a championed diversity begins to impinge upon an unfettered possession or exercise of rights.

Manent’s argument should give any body of scholars pause. It has, it seems to us, a number of important ramifications for Asian American literary studies; but we focus on only one here. We began our discussion with an indictment of presentism—which as a matter of course champions both *rights* and *diversity* as Manent uses the terms. The presentist model prefers to ignore tensions or schisms between the two; at best, it makes only cursory efforts to reconcile or arbitrate such tensions. Somewhat ironically, however, it rewards the fervor with which moral convictions or prescriptions are drawn from analyses of diversity or rights (or both together)—perhaps to call attention away from the logically flawed processes whereby such morality is deduced. More problematic still is the possibility that in employing the presentist model, one begins a textual analysis with a moral judgment or prescription already in mind, so that the resulting study is more parable than analysis, exemplifying (to collapse Manent’s terms) all the rigor of a stampede.

Admittedly, aesthetic criticism is and must be, in important ways, prescriptive. But even a casual analysis of the critical tradition tells us that prescription is a double-edged sword—and that, for every legitimate or healthy prescription, there are probably dozens that, because they invoke censorship or abuse, only compound ignorance, bigotry,

isolation, and suffering. That our own discipline of Asian American literature has a tradition of prescriptive criticism (especially as our field has developed over the past half century) should, then, be reason for introspection—as should the fact that our prescriptiveness may be compounded by justifiable changes in the umbrella field over our discipline, Asian American studies, wherein the field itself has become less isolationist and theoretical and increasingly activist and utilitarian.

Tendencies toward prescriptiveness sometimes lead us to gauge self-worth or, more problematic still, the worth of “real” and “textual” others by dents made in literary canons, university course offerings, or the American social condition. In so doing, we open ourselves not only to judging falsely but to perpetuating the very separatism—the divisiveness—we wish to eradicate from our classrooms, campuses, and larger communities. And when our scholarly business is reduced, as it sometimes is, to valuating a text according to its relative “fakery” or legitimacy—or according to our measure of the politics of its author—we may find ourselves on the shady side of Mars’ Hill, scrabbling at the foundations of the tribunal stand of the Areopagus with our picks. Indeed, such thinking is not merely divisive or separatist, but at the very root of what Philip Curtin has called the ghettoization of ethnic studies in the American academy (1993, A44).

In a recent *Heath Anthology of American Literature Newsletter* article, Robert Jackson (2003) recounts experiences teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird* at a historically black college in Alabama. Suggesting that we question not only *what* but *why* we read, Jackson admits surprise in discovering that his students seemed less inclined to read Lee’s novel for “political, historical, racial, or other agendas” than for a single aesthetic or emotional agenda: the “desire for a good story.” While certainly not discounting what he might call “non-aesthetic” ways of reading, Jackson nevertheless argues that his students’ story-centered engagement with Lee’s novel should “remind professional scholars” precisely “what got them into the business in the first place”—that is, presumably, formative reading experiences where one’s identification with a favorite narrator or narrative “temporarily, ecstatically suspends everything outside the story.” Such reading, Jackson argues, is “transcendent,” leading readers to recognize of favorite authors what one of his students wrote of Lee: “The woman had skills” (10).

As editors of the present volume, then, what is at issue for us is the extent to which one’s own prescriptive baggage (or that of one’s field) intrudes upon one’s capacity to perceive the “skills” of the early authors

or texts one engages. But as we attempt to set aside our prescriptions, we may discover the uncomfortably fine line between tolerance and accommodation, between empathy and emotionality, and between respect and self-deprecation. We must not leave ourselves open to what Renato Rosaldo (1989) has labeled, in an essay of the same title, “imperialist nostalgia”—the inadvertent though nonetheless insidious colonizing and memorializing of the other through corrupt ideology. While Rosaldo’s deconstructionist framework dates his essay, and while his glib dismissal of all ideologies as corrupt is troubling, a core assumption remains provocative and incisive: that the social anthropologist’s mistake is to merely name and “demystify” false ideologies when in fact nothing short of “dismantling” them will do. Such dismantling is effected, says Rosaldo, by “giving voice to the ideologies”—by letting them assume character and expression, as it were, and then allowing them to talk themselves to death. As they reveal themselves “at once [to] be compelling, contradictory, and pernicious,” Rosaldo argues, they “fall under their own weight,” the “inconsistencies within and between voices becoming apparent” (Rosaldo 1989, see 110 ff.). Speaking for ourselves and our contributors, our collective desire is (to borrow Rosaldo’s metaphor) to give voice to the ideologies, both the corrupt and the worthwhile, that surround the authors and texts of early Asian American literary history. As the corrupt voices talk themselves to death and the worthwhile voices gain in authority and clarity, the works which the voices foreground are brought into sharp relief. Seen in new ways, the works—to put it most simply—become more significant, complex, and compelling than we previously imagined them to be.

This is one way we have attempted to embrace dialogue as a means of counterbalancing prescription. Another is a more straightforward process: we have attempted to meet Asian American authors on their own grounds, reading a particular text against re-creations of the world in which it was originally produced and, insofar as judgments are applied to the text, allowing the standards of the author’s world (rather than always those of our own) to mediate our assignments of value or merit to the author’s writing. In the present volume, we and our contributors have espoused literary rather than other forms of scholarship, making concerted efforts to write useful, historically grounded criticism. To the extent that we have closely and carefully delineated the texts we write about, we have indeed adhered to what might be termed, in the broadest sense, a “formalist” approach. But careful readers of our volume will see that it is also grounded in a variety of other

approaches—New Historical, feminist, neo-Marxist, neo-Freudian, postcolonial, ethnohistorical—that balance and contextualize “close readings” (by affording them immediacy and cultural currency) without de-emphasizing or displacing the literary analysis itself (or the corresponding primary texts). We remain convinced that such an approach eschews unwarranted prescriptiveness and encourages significant dialogue with the texts we engage. It is in this light that we briefly consider Jade Snow Wong’s autobiographical novel *Fifth Chinese Daughter*.

Written at the height of World War II and published as the war was drawing to a close, Wong’s best-selling *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945) was the most widely read work of an Asian American writer during the late 1940s and early 1950s; its popularity among white audiences has justifiably invited, over the intervening decades, an intense scrutiny by Asian American literary critics of Wong’s politics, ideologies, themes, style, and characterizations, together with her use of Chinese and Chinese American cultural material. The upshot is that Wong has emerged as the designated persona non grata of Asian American letters; her very name (in the forms “a Jade Snow” or the punning “Snow job”) has come to signify an Asian American text that, in its false and Anglophilic representations of Asian or Asian American cultures, prostitutes itself to white Orientalist tastes. Likely the most damning epithet attached to Wong is the infamous noun string of the anonymous male writer cited by Merle Woo in her “Letter to Ma,” a string that, in its linguistic versatility, works adjectivally as well as nominally: “Jade Snow Wong Pocahontas yellow” (Woo 1994, 163).

While it is virtually impossible to imagine an entirely positive contemporary review of Wong, current appraisals run a fairly broad gamut—from the perfervid condemnation of a scholar like Karen Su (1994) to the dispassionate analysis and muted praise of Leslie Bow (2001). Su argues, finally, “for an interpretive strategy that can subvert attempts to read [Wong’s] texts as ‘model minority’ narratives” and that show “Wong’s ‘badge of distinction’” to be in “the way in which her texts reveal her own submission to the dominant American ideologies that oppress her.” Bow’s thesis, in contrast, is that while Wong’s “ethnic commodification fed white appetite for difference,” her text, as feminist discourse, “provides a normalizing counterpoint to ethnic differentiation”; accordingly, *Daughter* itself proves that “narratives of gender oppression often assume an air of timelessness, particularly in cases where thwarted self-actualization is situated within a narrative of parent/child conflict” (Bow 2001, 91).

While Bow (2001) and, to a lesser extent, Su (1994) quite brilliantly explain what Wong was subconsciously or inadvertently about in *Daughter*, both could more effectually explain what Wong knowingly accomplished in her history. If, in our approach to Wong's first book, we delay asking questions about "fakery" and "autobiography," and if, for the moment, we leave politics out of the mix, we might be more sensitive to Wong's stance and purpose as a modernist author steeped in formalism. We might recognize, for example, that while the anonymous male writer cited by Merle Woo effectually links Wong to the American narrative/myth of John Smith and Pocahontas, he has possibly focused on the wrong character. Arguably, in other words, Wong's *Daughter* has much more to do with Smith than Pocahontas. Despite Wong's rather coy explanation in her original author's note that "although a 'first person singular' book, this story is written in the third person from Chinese habit" (xiii), it is possible that she deliberately constructs herself as a "stranger in a strange land"—and that she co-opts Smith's own linguistic and emotional method of confronting the unfamiliar landscape in third person. Perhaps Wong, like many other high school students in the 1930s, read the following description of John Smith in the popular high school anthology *American Literature* edited by Briggs, Herzberg, and Bolenius:

In spite of dissension and privation, the two years of Smith's stay [in the Virginia colony] were in many respects the happiest period the colony knew for many years. He understood the Indians and was able to gain their friendship; moreover, he could command and govern the colonists. He had quite probably no intention of remaining in Virginia for any great length of time. No one place would ever have been able to satisfy his insatiable thirst for new risks. The new world was something he had wanted to see; colonization, an adventure he longed to add to the list of his experiences. (1933, 619)

If Wong's exposure to John Smith possibly occurred under such circumstances, one might then consider the rhetorical or political significance of Wong's creating herself as "colonizer"—and the sort of rhetorical, psychological, or sociological control afforded by the third-person voice that mocks humility by evoking a kind of immutability. One might also consider the textual layering that occurs in *Daughter* when Wong assumes Smith's role (a decidedly masculine one in his own era) of "adventurer/historian." Such considerations lead to questions about the ethnic irony in Wong's narrative, especially the irony deriving from the fact that the indigenous population with which Wong must be ingratiated

or with whom she must contend are descendants, figuratively, of Smith himself. While history now marks Smith as a naive if not inept interpreter of the events in which he participated, Wong (in contrast) may be not merely a fully conscious but a *manipulating* participant.

A close reading of virtually any chapter in the book gives rise to subsidiary questions. Take, for example, chapter 7, which is entitled "Learning to be a Chinese Housewife." True enough, the core of the chapter tells how the protagonist learns her mother's role and assumes partial responsibility for domestic matters. But, given its title, a reader naturally wonders why the chapter begins with a lengthy description of Wong's father's successfully transforming an unattractive basement into a thriving business location and place of residence for his family. One wonders, too, about the long digression later in the chapter describing "Uncle Jan," the attentive and unusually successful Chinatown butcher. And one asks why, particularly in this chapter, the only detailed method of food preparation recounted by the protagonist (the traditional method of cooking rice familiar to virtually every Asian or Asian American) is a method taught her not by her mother but by her father. One begins to consider, in short, how the narrative works to subvert gender and ethnic roles and thus to enable or empower its protagonist/author, along nontraditional lines, to assume a hybrid Asian American identity.

Challenge 3: Viewing America as an Eccentric Culture

In *Eccentric Culture: A Theory of Western Civilization* (2002), Rémi Brague defines Europe as an "eccentric" (as opposed to a "concentric") entity—that is, as an entity centered outside itself. As the origin of what we now know as Western civilization, Europe is (according to Brague) definable as a *container* rather than in terms of specific *contents*; or, more precisely, "the content of Europe" is "just to be a container, to be open to the universal." In this sense, says Brague, the idea of *Eurocentrism* is not merely "a misnomer," but "the contrary of the truth" (134, 146). Furthermore, that America is "founded on transplantation and on the idea of establishing a *novus ordo seclorum*" proves "the profoundly European legitimacy of the United States" (35).

Brague's argument is important to our purposes here. It reminds us to see America as evolving, decentered, and even fragmented rather than as static, definable, and monolithic. Too often, ethnic American sociological or aesthetic criticism assumes a rigidly uniform "America" existing in juxtaposition with—or opposition to—the ethnic body in question.

Pushed to extremes, this assumption simultaneously (and somewhat paradoxically) victimizes, objectifies, and orphans the relevant ethnic body. For the ethnic American literary critic engaged in historical or cultural analysis, this assumption has an additional consequence: collapsing history and culture into clichéd metanarratives of manipulation and loss, it blindsides the social and personal exceptions, aberrations or justifications that constitute, in many cases, the historical or aesthetic heart of the text in question.

Narrowing our discussion to the Asian American literary critic, we might consider, for example, how he or she responds to the year 1882, a date that will have enormous—and particularized—resonance. While the critic likely will not see “America,” much less all Americans, embodied in the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act, he or she may nevertheless contextualize 1880s America as ethically and culturally fixed, and as fixated on issues of race, rights, and identity. True enough, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were indeed marked by what can only be termed ethnocentric, cruelly delimiting, and finally unconstitutional policies of immigration, settlement, and citizenship; this was also the grand period of Orientalism, with its attendant objectification, exoticism, condescension, and oppression. But these decades are also marked by such phenomena as Lafcadio Hearn’s renouncing America for Japan—where he settled permanently as a Japanese citizen—and then by his enjoying an increased popularity in America as he published balanced essays on Japanese culture and English editions of Japanese ghost stories. Or Mark Twain’s writing incisive journalistic “filler” for the *Sacramento Union* and other papers wherein he satirized whites’ hypocrisy, insularity, and inhumanity in their dealings with Chinese Americans. Or the appearance of numerous stories and articles sympathetic to Asia and Asians (some written by Asian Americans) in mainstream periodicals like the *Youth’s Companion*, *Harper’s Monthly*, and *Century Magazine*. While it is certainly not our purpose to suggest that such historical details somehow soften or compensate for American immigration/naturalization policies or for American Orientalism, we nevertheless argue that an Asian American text of the late nineteenth or early twentieth century must be situated in the eccentric and complex culture that bore and fed it—and not in the artificially concentric culture in which we might choose to display it.

We must also take care not to construct Asia or its separate cultures or nations in monolithic ways. Sometimes early critics quite notoriously did precisely this, constructing Asian Americans as those with Chinese,

Japanese, or Korean ancestry and excluding all others, for example, or positing as studied and universal facts such notions as that autobiography is a white Christian and non-Asian (or even anti-Asian) form or that for most early writers, both their writing and their lives give evidence of their personal politics having been malformed or corrupted by (white) American racism.

Simply avoiding monolithic constructions is not enough. We also need to reformulate the very questions we ask of texts we read; we may need to modify such questions for each author—or even each text—we seek to understand. There are general questions we might put forward, beginning with the extent, ethically speaking, to which we may *demand* that early writers mirror our own values or perspectives. As we take measure of an early writer or text, we should give consideration to the racial/ethnic attitudes of the larger American community in which the writer worked, as well as to the social, economic, or educational status of the writer. We should also weigh the writer's need to "fit in" to the larger society in order to survive—as both writer and citizen. Such thoughtful exploration will point us away from the tendency to measure the full stretch of Asian American literary history against the concentric and presentist model of the post-1960s. It will point us instead toward a richer appreciation of Asian American history, so that crucial moments or points of origin—such as when three Chinese sailors aboard the *Pallas* were left stranded in Baltimore in 1785, or when "John" Manjiro Nakahama disembarked from the *John Howland* in May 1843, or when the first Chinese laborers arrived at "Gold Mountain" in early 1848—will be understood as comprising part of the "contents" (to return to Brague's analogy) of *America*, and not just of Asian America. This brings us to the second purpose of this volume: to rethink the significance of multicultural perspectives on early Asian American literary history.

RETHINKING MULTICULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

Thanks to theorists like Aihwa Ong and David Palumbo-Liu, we are starting to understand the significance of early twentieth-century developments in the dynamic shaping not only of the modern United States of America but also of the circum-Pacific region. During this period, as Palumbo-Liu puts it, literature imagined the "discursive space of Asian America, . . . both delineat[ing] its boundaries and envision[ing] particular modes of crossing them" (1999, 43). That is, authors of this period lived and worked during a time when cultural, political, and

economic connections between Asia and America were being formed in their modern incarnation; moreover, through their works these early authors participated in the process of critique and imagination that led eventually—albeit unevenly and not inevitably—to the Asian American Movement of the 1960s itself.

Questions we are now prepared to ask—and to pose answers to—are centered in the following issues:

- the response of Asian American writers to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the National Origins Act of 1924, and World War II;
- the ways in which early Asian American writers were global, multinational, or transnational, even before jet planes and the Internet;
- the extent to which early Asian American writers are *American* writers, *Asian* writers, or *modernist* writers;
- the meaning of being “Asian American” (if anything) before the term itself was invented; and
- the existence of an Asian American Renaissance akin to the Harlem Renaissance.

Essays in this volume suggest answers to these and other questions, making it more possible for us to engage productively with a group of writers that, only now perhaps, we are “culturally and psychologically prepared” to rediscover (Nelson 1989, 11).

Our capacity to consider Asian American literary history as a multicultural phenomenon has also been changed—and invigorated by—international recognition and analysis of Asian American literary discourse. For example, since 1996 several workshops at conferences of the European Association of American Studies (EAAS) have been devoted to such topics as Asian American identities, writings, and social ceremonies. Partly an outgrowth of a pioneering EAAS workshop was a special issue of UC Berkeley’s *Hitting Critical Mass*, “European Perspectives on Asian American Literature” (1996). In *Asian American Literature in the International Context: Readings on Fiction, Poetry and Performance* (2002), editors Rocío G. Davis and Sāmi Ludwig recognize “the remarkable imaginative and narrative contributions of Asian American literature . . . outside the boundaries of the United States” (10). Davis and Ludwig perceive their book as the first in a series of volumes that will not “merely theorize transcultural issues and the internationalization of research”—which they say only “endorses the already hegemonic position of powerful United States academic institutions”—but will

instead “*be* international rather than talk about it” while “presenting the research of scholars who are both inside *and* outside of the established discourse of Asian American studies” (12).

As scholars outside the United States have explored distinctions between and confluences of “Asian” and “American,” have unpacked American and Asian American cultural production, and have engaged in transnational considerations of ethnic differentiation, gender, and identity among Asian Americans, possibilities for discussing the whole of Asian American literary history have increased. That is, multinational and multicultural criticism have helped create a liminal space where early Asian American authors and texts may be considered not only as “Asian” and “American” but as simultaneously international, multicultural, and *individual* as well. At this point, before proceeding to an overview of the essays in this volume, it would be well to consider briefly the multicultural quality—the demographics—of Asian America between 1880 and 1965.

A Word on the Demographics of Early Asian American Literature

A consultation of King-Kok Cheung and Stan Yogi’s standard bibliography of Asian American literature, which was published in 1988, builds on two foundational assumptions: first, that Asian American literature, for better or worse, can be subcategorized into ethnic groups; and second, that up until the 1960s, literature by Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans—and to a lesser extent, of Filipino Americans and Korean Americans—dominates the comprehensive listing of works. Patterns of immigration before the 1960s account for the preponderance of Chinese American and Japanese American texts in Cheung and Yogi’s bibliography, as well as in this volume. As historians have recounted, immigration from China flowed relatively freely from the mid-nineteenth century until the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. U.S.-based capitalists requiring new sources of labor after the passage of this act arranged for workers from Japan and, for a short time thereafter, Korea and India. In 1924, however, the National Origins Act placed quotas and restrictions on immigration from all Asian nations. The only major exception during the 1920s and 1930s was the Philippines, which was, at the time, a U.S. colony whose denizens qualified as U.S. nationals; the Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1934, however, soon excluded even Filipino laborers.

Thus, members of more diverse ethnic and national groups did not immigrate to or settle in the continental United States in significantly large numbers until after the 1960s, when the Hart-Celler Act lifted

quotas restricting immigration from Asian nations. Furthermore, immigration from Southeast Asia did not rise significantly until after the United States retreated from Vietnam in 1975, and after the Refugee Act was passed in 1980. Literary critics in Asian American studies have responded to the increasing diversity of post-1960s Asian American immigration and settlement patterns mainly by including more recent writing by South Asian Americans, Southeast Asian Americans, and Pacific Islander Americans in their scholarship and syllabi. Early works by members of these groups are only now being recovered. For instance, South Asian American writer Dhan Gopal Mukerji's 1923 autobiography, *Caste and Outcast*, was reprinted by Stanford University Press in 2002. In future years, we expect that many more once rare yet significant works will reemerge—and that incisive critical assessments will follow.

A Critical Overview of the Present Volume

In establishing the authority and identities of the early authors and texts they examine, contributors to the present volume have successfully named and refuted false cultural expectations, seductive brands of prescription-making, and bewitching displays of cultural “nonwhiteness.” As we have previously stated, the overriding objective of our volume is to provide richer, broader, and—in some cases—more accurate readings of early Asian American works, readings that don't merely assert “how far we've come” but that allow us to see the dignity of early writers and the genuine merit of what they wrote. To accomplish this objective, contributors have, as appropriate, deliberately stepped outside current ideologies, models, and values and have, as new historians, ethnohistorians, and postcolonial revisionists, tried to show how early works were produced and received in their own time periods and how we might most fairly and profitably read them today.

In “Early Chinese American Autobiography: Reconsidering the Works of Yan Phou Lee and Yung Wing,” Floyd Cheung argues that Lee's autoethnography, *When I Was a Boy in China*, relies on Lee's authority as a privileged Chinese and a well educated American—“his unique socioeconomic and racialized position”—to fight Chinese exclusion by contesting “what he perceived to be inauthentic and unflattering ethnographies of the Chinese.” Yung similarly capitalized on his authority as a “financially successful, U.S.-educated Chinese American man” to “fashion a version of himself”—in his writing and his private life—that, in its embodiment of male respectability and accomplishment, quietly undermined the masculine Eurocentrism promulgated by Theodore

Roosevelt. Both Yung and Lee teach us, Cheung argues, that “authenticity itself is contingent upon individual circumstances, personal motives, and historical context.”

David Shih argues in “The Self and Generic Convention: Winnifred Eaton’s *Me, A Book of Remembrance*” that “as a Chinese Eurasian living in Canada and the United States during the Exclusion era, Eaton turned to writing as the most direct way to manage her situation as racialized subject.” But “far from providing her with the means to recover an authentic self,” Shih argues, “her autobiographical act only confirmed that the articulation of any sense of individuality must always be mediated by the forms and structures available to the autobiographer.” In this sense, *Me* poignantly records the emergence of a “self still in transition, a woman ready to alter the course of her life but not at the expense of her livelihood.”

In “Diasporic Literature and Identity in *A Daughter of the Samurai*,” Georgina Dodge discusses the unquestionable influence of Sugimoto’s novel on Lydia Minatoya’s *Strangeness of Beauty*—partly to show how *Daughter* is to be read and partly to demonstrate its continuing topical and aesthetic relevance. Read accurately, says Dodge, Sugimoto’s narrative (like Minatoya’s more recent one) “skillfully blends diverse identities in order to challenge the boundaries of gender, class, and nationality”—and questions “cultural models based on traditional values,” models which “can serve as templates for behavior but must change with the times.”

In “The Capitalist and Imperialist Critique in H. T. Tsiang’s *And China Has Hands*,” Julia H. Lee decries the current tendency to read Tsiang’s text “as merely a historical artifact,” as an “authentic” recounting of “a reactionary time in America.” Doing so, she suggests, has blinded us to “how capitalist and imperialist enterprises racialize or sexually objectify their victims . . . in order to maintain power” and to how Marxism is inscribed “as the foundational principle of the novel.” In the end, despite its determined presentation of a “transcendent vision of a . . . political state” at the expense of “addressing the troubling issues of sexuality, race, and gender,” which fuel “the oppressive machinations of capitalism and imperialism,” the novel “provocatively insists that racial intolerance and gender oppression” are at the heart of all exploitative systems.

In his “Unacquiring Negrophobia: Younghill Kang and the Cosmopolitan Resistance to the Back and White Logic of Naturalization,” Stephen Knadler measures *East Goes West* against the “logic of naturalization” represented by *Ozawa v. the United States* (1922), thus