



*Native Informants  
and Ethnographic Feminism  
in Asian American Texts*

U.S. laws designate all foreign nationals as "aliens," legal or illegal, resident or nonresident. Asian immigrants have in recent years become one of the newest waves of aliens arriving on the shores of America. But even after having been naturalized as U.S. citizens, they remain alien-ated due to, primarily, their non-Caucasian physical traits, a painful historical fact crystalizing in the internment of American-born Japanese American citizens, but not European-born German and Italian citizens in the United States, during World War II.<sup>1</sup> Barred by linguistic, cultural, and other barriers, these Asian immigrants rarely tell their stories firsthand in what is known today as Asian American literature; their stories are told, instead, by their children or their grandchildren. Consequently, in most Asian American texts, there exists a tense triangular relationship: Asian American raconteurs and the American market actively woo each other in appropriating alien(s') stories, the surest sign of ethnicity, as commodity. Indeed, a significant source of that ethnicity is Asian American writers' emplotment of immigrants' heart-wrenching and almost always "exotic" experiences. While these alien(s') stories contribute to rendering Asian American texts highly marketable, immigrants remain largely a blank, an absence—the voiceless, plastic other waiting to be born by their children.

The core paradox of this triangular relationship stems from Asian American writers' identity politics, most nakedly embodied in the position of *Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Asian American Writers* (1974), the first anthology of its kind edited by American-born Asians.<sup>2</sup> To establish their unique identity as neither Asians nor Euro-Americans, its editors—Frank Chin, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong—in various prefaces sharply demarcate themselves from Asians, while empowering themselves in the midst of a white society through immigrant memories and the mythic Asian past. These two tactics, used indiscreetly, contradict each other, exhibiting the simultaneous urges to distance from and embrace things Asian, creating the problematics of representing the other which is part of the self. This dilemma is further exacerbated by the inability of immigrants to “write back”—to mount an oppositional discourse.

This triangular relationship of alien stories, Asian American teller, and American market will be interrogated with respect to what I call the “ethnographic feminism”<sup>3</sup> in texts such as Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1976), Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1989), and D. Roberts' “Mei Mei: A Daughter's Song” (1989). The ethnographic myths of Fa Mu Lan, the Kitchen God, and Kuan-yin Pu-sa (“Lady Buddha”) narrated by the three mother figures who act as native informants in the three texts respectively are seamlessly transposed into a feminist, Westernized context to, in part, cater to the American readership, whose appetite for exotic (hence ethnographic) and politically correct (hence feminist) readings is simultaneously satisfied. While Kingston invariably Orientalizes and objectifies China and its immigrants,<sup>4</sup> Tan and Roberts struggle to undo, to varying degrees of success, that very impulse inherent in the tradition of “ethnographic feminism” inaugurated by Kingston's woman warriors.

This approach of training literary and ethnographic gazes on a text has been practiced for some time. George Marcus' “Afterword: Ethnographic Writing and Anthropological Careers,” in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986), opens with “The task of the Santa Fe seminar from which these essays [of *Writing Culture*] emerged was to introduce a literary consciousness to ethnographic practice by showing various ways in which ethnographies can be read and written” (262). A specific instance of such interdisciplinarity is found, in that collection, in Michael M. J. Fischer's “Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory,” which studies Kingston

and other "ethnic autobiography or autobiographical fiction" in light of "textual theories of deferred, hidden, or occulted meaning" (194–95) to re-examine the notion of ethnicity. The authors in this collection no longer view ethnic literature and ethnography as two totally unrelated disciplines; instead, the terrain of the presumably objective and scientific research of primitive cultures is believed to overlap with ethnic writings, sharing similar strategies of textual production as well as of subjectivity construction.

Asian American scholars have certainly attended to this fusion of literary criticism and ethnography. Patricia Lin in "Clashing Constructs of Reality: Reading Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* as Indigenous Ethnography," for instance, applies the postmodernist approach to textuality in *Writing Culture* to illustrate how Kingston's novel approximates contemporary ethnography in terms of contending voices. Stressing Kingston's playfulness and multivalence, characteristics akin to the style of postmodernist ethnography, Lin nevertheless ignores Kingston's departure from Marcus and others in terms of their reluctance to objectify the other (alien story) in constructing one's (Asian American) subjectivity. More specifically, an Asian American author such as Kingston acquires ethnographic details of an alien people from the "native and subaltern informants"—unfailingly the immigrant generation like the mother figure in *The Woman Warrior*—and proceeds to transcribe alien(s) stories into a feminist context, thus creating a winning formula of quasi-ethnographic Orientalism and timely, politically correct feminism, a combination which accounts for Kingston's sudden rise in the West in recent decades.

Though Kingston herself has rarely elaborated on her own success by way of its ties to market value, other ethnic writers have. The Anglo-Japanese novelist Kazuo Ishiguro has candidly linked the contextual to the textual. In an interview with Allan Vorda and Kim Herzinger, Ishiguro discusses the causal relationship between the times ethnic writers happen to live in and their rapid ascent:

In Britain, around the time when I published my first novel [*A Pale View of Hills* (1982)], the climate had actually turned towards a great deal of interest in writers who wrote books set in that particular setting [non-Western locales]. . . . I tend to think if I didn't have a Japanese name and if I hadn't written books at that stage set in Japan, it would have taken me years longer to get the kind of attention and sales that I got in England with my first two books. (133)

The immediate acclaim his works receive in England and North America, however, does not derive from the kind of exoticism in Kingston. In fact, his works are praised by the Japanese Nobel Laureate Oe Kenzaburo as containing "excellent descriptions of life in Japan, of Japanese buildings and landscapes" ("The Novelist in Today's World: A Conversation" 164). To which, Ishiguro responds that while his depiction may be accurate, it is "very much my own personal, imaginary Japan" (164). He would like to be regarded, professes Ishiguro repeatedly, as an "international" rather than ethnic writer (169). An intriguing contrast to Kingston's phantasmagoric Orient, Ishiguro's exquisitely realistic Japan, when identified as such, has to be elevated to a universal level. Both betray, in varying ways, the unease Asian minorities in the West feel about themselves: one resorts to Orientalism to prove how un-Oriental she is, the other Universalism. Their Asian heritage is portrayed as an incidental, almost negligible appendix to their Western and cosmopolitan identity.<sup>5</sup>

Despite their contrasting styles, Ishiguro's career in Britain in the early 1980s repeats the pattern of Kingston's success in the United States in the mid-1970s. Both novelists have clearly provided something the reading public demanded. With regard to *The Woman Warrior*, its stunning success stems, as stated earlier, from the exotic China Kingston creates in conjunction with the feminist message she interjects into that wondrous landscape—a universe where the misogynist, corrupt culture forces the "No Name Woman" to give birth in a pigsty; where a mother allegedly cuts her daughter's frenum; where Hong Kong's Kung Fu films as part of American popular culture are superimposed on contemporary politics of the madding crowd of red guards at Tiananmen Square; where Fa Mu Lan's bare back is tattooed with Yueh Fei's words;<sup>6</sup> and where countless other fantastic tales bedevil the reader. Such blatant Orientalism notwithstanding, Kingston's reflection on the "cultural mis-readings" of her text takes the form more of a critique of the reading public than of her own complicity in cultural misrepresentations. In reviewing the reviews of *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston finds the otherwise complimentary commentaries aggravating in their highlighting of her interracial marriage. She believes that her last name served in the seventies to dilute the sense of defamiliarization American audiences were likely to feel when confronted with ethnic literature, for a marriage with a Western man suggested and continues to suggest to the public a sensibility already assimilated.<sup>7</sup> (In which case, "Hong," no longer a for-

bidding sign, actually increases the appeal of the exotica.) A shrewd analysis on her part, Kingston nonetheless neglects to mention the fundamental fact that such "cultural mis-readings" catapult her to the status of the premier Asian American writer. More significantly, these mis-readings may come partially from Kingston's own mis-representations of the Other—China and Chinese.

Amy Tan, Kingston's heir apparent in Chinese American literature, burst into the literary scene in 1989 with the publication of *The Joy Luck Club*. Tan's handling of ethnographic materials has "mellowed" somewhat along with the softening of attitude toward China and its immigrants during the two decades since *The Woman Warrior*. Asian Americans no longer have as urgent a need as before to distinguish themselves from Asians due to the influx of immigrants in their midst as well as the change of political, cultural climate. Elaine Kim argues in her foreword to *Reading the Literatures of Asian America* (1992) that since the transformations in the political relationships between the United States and Asian countries and in the U.S. immigration policy of the mid-1970s, "[t]he lines between Asian and Asian American, so important in identity formation in earlier times, are increasingly being blurred" (xiii). With a broad stroke meant to encompass the world, Frederick Buell in *National Culture and the New Global System* (1994) has characterized this shift as moving from a consolidation of bounded, separate ethnic identity to an expansion of a more heterogeneous, hybrid self:

There has been a transformation from speaking against to speaking with and to; from a sense of cultural communities as separate to an awareness of their complex interlocking; from a cultivation of opposition to a grappling with the possibilities and limitations of interaction. (236)

Under such improved atmosphere regarding ethnicity, Tan has taken leave of Kingston's hostility toward native informants, although traces of Tan's own Orientalism still persist. A case in point is the highly sensationalized story delivered by one of the four mothers in *The Joy Luck Club*. An-mei Hsu, to impart "shou" (codes of behavior) to her American-born (therefore uncivilized) daughter, narrates how An-mei's mother commits self-immolation: she cut a piece of her own flesh and cooked it in the medicinal soup in hopes of reviving her dying mother-in-law in China (48). The stark contradiction of the mother's intention of conversion to

respectability and her means—a horrendous and macabre account about the last generation—bespeaks Orientalism which views the East as inscrutable and antithetical to the West.

But Tan's much more cordial position toward ethnographic elements in her text can be seen most clearly in the romantic refrains of Chinese-ness toward the end of that novel. Jing-mei Woo (the only daughter who, in addition to her English name June, has a Chinese first name) begins the story, replaces her mother after her death at the club, and ends the fiction by taking a trip to China to meet her twin sisters. Jing-mei's journey back reads almost like a "homecoming" in its reiteration of how she feels Chinese once her feet touch Chinese soil, how her Chinese genes are instantly activated, and how her Chinese side is "waiting to be let go." Though not without some foreshadowing throughout of Jing-mei's urges to seek her roots, such ethnic, even nationalist, assertions remain slightly melodramatic. However, Tan's somewhat maudlin attitude toward China and Chinese immigrants illustrates the divergence of the two leading Asian American writers: while Kingston fixes her distant and rather cold gaze on the Orient, Tan at least finds a tender place in her heart for it.

Tan may have gone to the other extreme, though. While the interracial protagonist, Olivia Bishop, in *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995) confesses that "[i]t's hip to be ethnic" (157), the emphasis falls on "hip" rather than "ethnic." Opting for the slang "hip," Tan unknowingly reveals the irony of her status as an ethnic writer. Part of the novel resembles a travelogue set in Changmian, China, a travelogue disguised as yet another "homecoming" to ethnic roots. This journey to the backwaters of China, a journey back in time literally since Olivia revisits her former life at that remote village as a Western missionary around the turn of the century, has more to do with the New Age spiritual concerns in the States here and now than with the exotic, mythologized China. Ethnicity is thoroughly romanticized by Tan because it is "in."

It is perhaps inevitable that these writers, to various degrees, Orientalize the East. Shirley Lim's "Assaying the Gold: Or, Contesting the Ground of Asian American Literature" puts it eloquently in the vein of Foucauldian and Saidian analysis of power and discourse:

The "problem" of ethnicity becomes "resolved" in the writers' facility and ease with majority rhetoric and aesthetics, and the "danger" posed by the unfamiliar and alien is thus



defused. Instead of defamiliarization, that radicalizing technique by which the complacent majority are made uncomfortable, Asian American writers who have mastered the resources of American English literariness are able to elide the alien in Asian American culture and make it accessible to American audiences. . . . One technique by which they do this is to posit themselves not as advantaged insiders of the Asian culture but as similarly disadvantaged as their Anglo readers in finding that Asian component bizarre, distasteful, and difficult to comprehend. . . . Another is to abstract, intellectualize, and refine upon ethnic experience in a fairly logocentric manner, so that the ironizing distance parallels the white reader's cultural distance from the ethnic materials. (161)

The references to "American audiences" and "Anglo readers" suggest a minority discursive practice targeting and addressing the dominant population. This concern for the particular kind of market drives the practitioners to identify with or at least acquiesce to the Orientalist perspective, thus following the paradigm of Orientalism in terms of the binary opposition of Self and Other, of subjectivity and objectivity, and, most of all, of the power structure inherent in such a dichotomy. In addition to such a collaboration with the majority culture, these writers also thrive in the American market as a result of an alignment of their texts with one of the dominant current ideologies in the West—feminism.

The manner in which Kingston and others ingeniously join feminism with ethnography is their deployment of "the theology of the oppressed." Indigenous to Chinese folk beliefs are Kingston's woman warrior such as Fa Mu Lan, Tan's Kitchen God, and Roberts' Kuan-yin Pu-sa ("Lady Buddha"). But these folk deities are given a contemporary feminist spin to empower the oppressed female characters in China as well as in America. Kingston, for instance, reconfigures the myth of Fa Mu Lan in *The Woman Warrior* in order to found/inherit a feminist lineage based on the legendary heroine and the strong-willed, barefoot-doctor mother character, Brave Orchid. Yet quite revealing about Kingston's ambivalence toward her native informants is that once the feet of this mother figure, to paraphrase Tan, touch American soil, she deteriorates into a stubborn, superstitious, and ignorant old woman, who is nothing but a quaint embarrassment to her American-born children. The protagonist Brave Orchid has lost her antagonist, such as the "Sitting Ghost" in the Cantonese folk belief sys-

tem, whose existence is essential for the demonstration of her heroism; she herself becomes "the other," an alien "ghost" in America and to her own children. Brave Orchid's ways are judged to be out of date and out of place, symptomatic of her ineffectual adaptation to the New World. This native informant, initially providing a feminist prototype through her deeds, has since declined into a negative example whom the daughter-narrator must shun rather than emulate in America. Kingston's delineation of Brave Orchid, in fact, borders on an image of immigrants as "schizophrenics," who fail to cohere the two halves—American and non-American—of their experience and who consequently lose touch with the American reality. This split personality culminates in Moon Orchid, Brave Orchid's feeble sister, who goes insane in the United States.<sup>8</sup>

Tan also utilizes "ethnographic feminism," but in a reverse fashion. Tan first presents in *The Kitchen God's Wife* the indigenous informants—Winnie Louie, Helen (or Hulan), and Grand Auntie Du—in a light as unsavory as, but definitely more comical than, Kingston's; nonetheless, these emigre mothers grow in stature in the narrative. (The equivalent to these evolving female immigrant characters in *The Hundred Secret Senses*, of course, is Kwan, Olivia's half-sister.) Grand Auntie Du, whom Pearl, Winnie's Americanized daughter, haphazardly dismisses to be long dead, turns out to be Winnie's savior from a Shanghai prison. Helen, seemingly an illiterate scatterbrain, adroitly fabricates the lie of her brain tumor to secretly coerce the mother and the daughter to confide in each other the unsettling truth. Finally, Winnie appears to be unreasonable and "negative-thinking" (152) only because of her horrible sufferings at the hands of her monstrous first husband, Wen Fu. In fact, the persevering spirit of Winnie gradually unfolds in this novel until she becomes all but a deity herself—"the Kitchen God's Wife." Despite their similar strategy of feminizing folk beliefs that originally privilege the patriarchy, Tan's text aspires to present the Orientalist knot tied by Kingston, a self-proclaimed "outlaw knot-maker" (*The Woman Warrior* 190), in a far more light-hearted, charming, and "lawful" mode. Even though they both immortalize the peripheral female figures in Chinese culture, they draw from contrasting aspects of the Oriental mystique. Kingston deploys images of a "hard-core," unrelenting Orient to distance the reader from it, whereas Tan renders China endearing through a melodramatic, tragicomical plot.

Beyond the manipulation of ethnographic materials gathered from native informants, another consequence of "ethnographic



feminism" is male backlash—the criticism of reverse stereotyping and objectification of male characters in the texts. While immigrant mothers are portrayed as enigmatic so that their daughters can begin to make sense of themselves, Chinese and Chinese American men, so the accusation goes, are likewise swathed in mystery and their psychology simplified in the writers' fervor of reinventing female subjectivity. Men rather than women now serve as the background props against which females define themselves.

The male backlash against "ethnographic feminism" is spearheaded by the contentious Frank Chin, who takes on the myth of Fa Mu Lan in his "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake."<sup>9</sup> In this article, Chin, as bellicose as ever, argues against what he sees as Kingston's exploitation of this legend, which is alleged to misrepresent the Asian tradition as misogynist. To claim authority on the Chinese source, Chin even takes pains to quote verbatim—in classical Chinese—an anonymous poem considered to be the culminating expression of the Fa Mu Lan myth. This might be an exercise in futility since no evidence suggests that either Chin or his opponent is a competent reader of classical or even vernacular Chinese; however, a Chinese tale has been elevated to the site of present-day struggle between Asian American writers over feminism and its backlash. Both tellers reshape their source stories in his/her image in the name of reclaiming the authentic Chinese heritage, while veiling their design for control of discourse and representation. Indeed, to borrow Edward Said's theories in *Orientalism* (1978), such discourse concerns only with the exteriority of the other—immigrants and Asian culture—as Asian Americans see fit to project.

Chin's retaliation is motivated by a wounded male ego, signifying male rage over being consistently ignored by the American academy and market. It might be more sensible for Chin and other like-minded writers to take on the literary establishment and the mainstream sensibility rather than to vent their fury on Asian American feminists. But the kind of public indifference suffered by Chin has also struck Kingston's career. Kingston has long asserted that she was compelled to put the materials on Chinese males into *China Men* (1980) for the sake of coherence of *The Woman Warrior*. But this sequel to *Warrior* never achieved the fame of her first book; the critical and the commercial receptions have been lukewarm for this text on the historical travails of Chinese males written in a style much less extravagant. This lack of interest testifies to the power of "ethnographic feminism," without which, even Kingston flops.

Moreover, Chin's complaint concerning the representation of males is not entirely without merit, provided one is able to see through Chin's emotionally-charged, mad-prophet pose. Males are de facto excluded from, for instance, Tan's imaginary world. The mah-jong club in *The Joy Luck Club* proceeds devoid of any major male participation. By the same token, the men in *The Kitchen God's Wife* receive stereotypical depictions at best. The male protagonist in *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Wen Fu, the epitome of Chinese patriarchy, rarely acquires psychological depth other than a demonic kind. To Tan's credit, she does attend to this inadequacy by intimating the practical inability of Winnie the narrator to probe into her tormentor's psyche in a male-dominated society. Tan skillfully delineates Winnie's maturation via her change from blaming Wen Fu's mother for his wrongdoing to blaming the true culprit himself. An additional indication that this flaw is being ameliorated is the well-developed male protagonist, Simon Bishop, in Tan's most recent novel, *The Hundred Secret Senses*. But the irrefutable fact remains that far too many blanks exist when it comes to male characters, particularly in *The Kitchen God's Wife*. Why is Wen Fu such a sadist? Is he not fearful of being punished by Jiaguo, his immediate superior and Helen's husband? Would Jiaguo's sense of guilt over impregnating and causing the death of Helen's sister be sufficient to reform him from a heartless military officer to a kind and loving, yet now impotent, husband? Why does Jimmy Louie, Winnie's second husband, convert to Christianity after being forced to leave China, his new-found faith supposedly contributing to his decreased passion for Winnie? The best incarnation of the disjointed images of males is found in Winnie's father, who falls from a wealthy, self-assured man to a collaborator with the Japanese invaders and a derelict after the war, crippled by a stroke. The two halves of the father's face allegorize males: the normal half retains his past dignity, while the other, paralyzed, betrays the dark and insidious self. Males in this novel are stereotypes of extremes rather than living beings like Winnie and Pearl who never cease to surprise readers.

In a miniature version, Roberts' radio play, "Mei Mei: A Daughter's Song," which won the 1989 George Foster Peabody Award for Broadcasting Excellence, exhibits "ethnographic feminism" in a manner less antagonistic to the Other than Kingston and less melodramatic than Tan, resulting in a moving story that lingers in the air long after it is gone. Produced the same year *The Kitchen God's Wife* was published, Roberts' play also resembles

Tan's novel in its initial emotional quandary between the mother and the daughter and in its denouement of a happy reconciliation. In this well-crafted, twenty-seven-minute-long play with fugue-like echoes and refrains, Roberts interweaves the American-educated Mei Mei's "confession," her interviews of her immigrant mother, and sound effects to construct this tapestry of voices on the impossibility and inevitability of communication between the mother and the daughter.<sup>10</sup> One such strand of this complex composition is the tumultuous relationship of the two women, reflected in the perpetual modifications of statements from the outset. While the title suggests a daughter's story, the first line foregrounding the mother's presence—"Just remember," the narrator, Mei Mei, announces, "this isn't about me. It's about my mother"—undercuts the title. Moreover, despite Mei Mei's attempt at detachment by insisting on the stilted address of "mother" (already complicated by the background cries of "Mommy" of a Taiwanese girl), she subconsciously reverts back to the term of endearment, Mama, halfway through the play, a term which corresponds to the loving name of Mei Mei (little sister or daughter). These narrative strategies demonstrate how the stories of the immigrant mother and the Asian American daughter intertwine, ideally, into one. Indeed, for Asian American literature, this wedding may herald a more inclusive identity politics, forgoing the radical othering of Asian heritage advocated by the *Aiiieeeee!* anthology, practiced implicitly by Kingston, and sugarcoated by Tan. This bittersweet merging of the mother and the daughter, of the native informant and the Western feminist, occurs most visibly in, once again, "the theology of the oppressed" in the play.

The mother in her teens, illiterate and abused in war-torn Taiwan, finds strength in her faith in Kuan-yin Pu-sa or "Lady Buddha," the Goddess of Mercy prevalent in Chinese folk beliefs closely linked to Buddhism. She claims that Kuan-yin Pu-sa dissuaded her from suicide by taking her on what seems to be a mental journey to heaven and providing her with a vision of beatitude, hence abrogating the mother's glimpse of female ghosts "with the tongue roll[ing] down from her mouth"—the fate of the mother had she taken her own life. The juxtaposition of heaven and cemetery, both fantastic manifestations of the soul, is not a mere ethnographic footnote to the Taiwanese mother's traumatic experience. Rather, this contrast is inextricably tied to feminism in the specifically American context. The vision in heaven, according to the mother's pidgin English, is of "all different color people," hence

befitting the multiethnic fabric of the host society. As for the feminist lineage, Kuan-yin Pu-sa is as much a savior for the mother as the mother is for Mei Mei. As it turns out, the mother's "superstition" empowers not only herself but the daughter as well: the narrator at one point accepts the deity's might in stopping her own paricidal drive. Heaving a sigh of relief, the daughter reflects: "Maybe Buddha was there for her [mother or daughter?] that night." Buddha stayed the mother's suicidal hand as well as the daughter's homicidal one. More significantly, the play ends with the myth of the Dragon King—also from the mother's folk belief system—when a peasant girl and the king's daughter join in a duet to augur rain, thus ending the drought. This chorus follows in the wake of, and against the backdrop of, the mother and daughter's peals of laughter, like drops of rain falling on the wasteland, over their inability to communicate. Their lack of communication is resolved in a true communion of the souls. The theology of the oppressed is hence enacted both in terms of the mother's reliance on Kuan-yin Pu-sa and in terms of the daughter's similar appeal to that deity and to her mother, now a goddess of sorts, immortalized by the artistry of the radio play.

The tense triangular relationship of alien story, Asian American teller, and American market is epitomized in the "ethnographic feminism" in Kingston, Tan, and Roberts. That relationship is highly problematic and Orientalist in Kingston. With Tan, the Asian Other turns so innocuous and "good" that that image may saturate the collective consciousness of the American public more effortlessly than Kingston's pugnacious one. "Secret senses" exchanged between two women, Olivia and Kwan, are after all more enticing and less intimidating than woman warriors' fragmenting stories. Roberts appears to have sustained a creative and potentially egalitarian tension among the three forces in her radio production. Implicit in such complex interfaces, however, are a host of pending issues: alien in relation to American identity, ethnic-specific or mainstreaming positionality, and male as opposed to female subjectivity, among others. But the evolution of Asian American literature within the context of contemporary American culture points toward a less embattled and divisive milieu regarding these points of contention, in part due to the globalization of economy and its impact on how one perceives the other. Another encouraging sign is that this fin-de-siècle of ours has witnessed the coming of age of Asian American literature, one of the fastest-growing ethnic literatures, evident from the stream of Asian American

anthologies, fictions, plays, poetry, films, and works in other genres. The amazing outburst of creativity from this traditionally silenced group is long overdue. Exactly because of their increasing standing, it is incumbent upon Asian Americans to engage in a conscientious self-critique on the problematics of canonization and commercialization.