

□ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC 340

Volume 340

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers



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Contemporary Literary Criticism

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Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

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CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
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- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Wesley, Marilyn C. "Anne Hèbert: The Tragic Melodramas." In *Canadian Women Writing Fiction*, edited by Mickey Pearlman, 41-52. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 246, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, 276-82. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

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Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments xi

Literary Criticism Series Advisory Board xiii

Asian American Literature

<i>Introduction</i>	1
<i>Representative Works</i>	2
<i>Theorizing Asian American Literature</i>	4
<i>Themes of Transnationalism</i>	59
<i>Themes of Sexuality and Sexual Identity</i>	109
<i>The Role of Food in Identity Formation</i>	138
<i>Asian American Spirituality</i>	152
<i>Further Reading</i>	162

Julia Kristeva 1941-	164
<i>Bulgarian-born French linguist, psychoanalyst, literary theorist, essayist, and novelist</i>	

Natasha Trethewey 1966-	313
<i>American poet</i>	

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Author Index 361

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Topic Index 483

CLC Cumulative Nationality Index 505

CLC-340 Title Index 521

Asian American Literature

The following entry presents criticism on the production and study of Asian American literature since the late 1960s.

INTRODUCTION

The production of Asian American literature has steadily increased since the late 1960s, when it first began to flourish as part of the political movement for minority civil rights and social justice. The boundaries of the canon of Asian American literature have been continuously debated and redrawn as the term *Asian American* has itself undergone constant revision. Asian American literature was at first most closely associated with writers with ethnic roots in China, Japan, the Philippines, and Korea because these were the most established groups in the United States. But with the rise in migration from South and Southeast Asia—India, Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam—the term *Asian American* came to be more broadly understood to reflect the diversity of the Asian American community.

The parameters of Asian American literature have been largely defined by the field of Asian American literary criticism. In the introductory essay to *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature* (1996), King-Kok Cheung notes, “The umbrella term ‘Asian American’ was coined in the late 1960s to promote political solidarity and cultural nationalism. The movement was a broad-based one, appealing to immigrants and American-born Asians alike. By contrast early Asian American cultural criticism—which emerged during this period as part of the larger movement—placed a much greater emphasis on nativity.” Thus, in the 1970s, when Asian American studies became institutionalized in university academic departments, the field was dominated by a political ideal of nativism. The most famous early anthology of Asian American literature, *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (1974), edited by Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Inada, and Shawn Wong, included only the works of Chinese, Filipino, and Japanese Americans. As Sau-ling Cynthia Wong explains in *Reading Asian American Literature* (1993), the editors of the collection defined the “true Asian American sensibility” as “non-Christian, nonfeminine,

and nonimmigrant.” Although *Aiiieeeee!* challenged many of the negative stereotypes attached to the older term *Oriental*, its masculinist and nationalist stance proved highly controversial in the 1980s with the increasing popularity of Asian American women’s writing and the changing Asian American demographic effected by the influx of South and Southeast Asian immigration.

In her 1982 *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context*, the first major critical work on the subject, Elaine H. Kim attempted to divorce the concept of Asian American from the requirement of American birth. Kim redefined Asian American literature as “published creative writings in English by Americans of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Filipino descent.” Acknowledging the controversial nature of the term *Asian American*, Kim justified her attention to just four national groups on the basis of their similar experience of American racism. Her approach generated further debate about the geographic and intellectual boundaries of Asian American literature. Scholars raised a host of questions associated with the expansion of the field to immigrant authors: Can Asian American literature be written in languages other than English? Is it confined to American experience? Does “America” imply only the United States or the rest of the Americas? Should the classification of Asian American literature be refined to reflect commonality of national backgrounds and community life in America? Does Asian American literature include works by persons who are not Asian American but write about persons who are?

In their 2010 introduction to a Special Issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* titled “Theorizing Asian American Fiction,” editors Stephen Hong Sohn, Paul Lai, and Donald C. Goellnicht describe three consecutive but overlapping disciplinary phases in the field of Asian American literary studies: “the cultural nationalist phase of the late 1960s to the late 1970s, the feminist phase that was dominant from the late 1970s through about 1990 (and still ongoing), and the transnational or diasporic phase from about 1990 on.” They identify the first phase with the cultural nationalism epitomized by *Aiiieeeee!* They cite Maxine Hong Kingston’s autobiographical *The Woman Warrior* (1976) as inaugurating the second phase. A memoir depicting the author’s struggle to synthesize her dual heritage as

a first-generation Chinese American woman, *The Woman Warrior* won the National Book Critics Circle Award for nonfiction and is widely recognized as the first book to create a mainstream audience for Asian American literature, paving the way for the phenomenal success of David Henry Hwang's Broadway hit *M. Butterfly* (1988) as well as a string of highly popular novels about intergenerational conflict written by Asian American women, most notably Amy Tan's bestselling *The Joy Luck Club* (1989). Frank Chin, one of the editors of *Aiiieeeee!*, famously accused Kingston of inauthenticity for pandering to white audiences with "fake" versions of Chinese myth, but Kingston's work was instrumental in redirecting Asian American literary studies away from Chin's masculinist and racialized paradigm to include the complexities of gender and sexuality. The third phase in the field of Asian American literature criticism, transnationalism, has largely been a response to the massive demographic shifts that have brought more and diverse Asian populations to North America. According to Sohn, Lai, and Goellnicht, "So significant have these demographic shifts been that by the end of the twentieth century, the majority of Asian Americans and Asian Canadians were born outside of the US and Canada, and did not speak English as their first language, a situation very different from that in 1968 when Asian American Studies was forming as a field."

Cheung speaks of a similar progression in the production and study of Asian American literature since the 1960s: "Whereas identity politics—with its stress on cultural nationalism and American nativity—governed earlier theoretical and critical formulations, the stress is now on heterogeneity and diaspora. The shift has been from seeking to 'claim America' to forging a connection between Asia and Asian America; from centering on race and on masculinity to revolving around the multiple axes of ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality; from being concerned primarily with social history and communal responsibility to being caught in the quandaries and possibilities of postmodernism and multiculturalism." The burgeoning group of diasporic writers associated with the transnational phase has found inspiration in themes of exile, biculturalism, globalization, cosmopolitanism, and transgressive gender and sexual identities. The dual consciousness produced by the blurring of boundaries between Asia and Asian America resulted in overlap between the fields of Asian American studies and postcolonial studies. Seiwoong Oh writes in the introduction to *Encyclopedia of Asian American Literature* (2007), "As if to demonstrate the cross-fertilization of the two fields, what used to be key terms in postcolo-

nial studies—*diaspora*, *fragmentation*, *subjectivity*, *hybridity*, and *multiplicity*—are now commonly used in Asian-American studies as well."

The growing diversity of the Asian American population, and the emergence of new and underrepresented voices, has further complicated Asian American critical practice. The heterogeneity of Asian America, the joining together of diasporic Asia and Asian America, and the mainstreaming of so many Asian American writers has placed issues of cultural autonomy in greater tension with issues of political solidarity and minority representation. The continuously evolving Asian American demographic has caused critics of Asian American literature to remain focused on the identity politics of race, gender, sexuality, class, and nation to the exclusion of the literary merits of the texts. Although Asian American writers have displayed an increasing attention to matters of artistry, "Asian American literary criticism," according to Sue-im Lee, one of the editors of *Literary Gestures: The Aesthetic in Asian American Writing* (2006), "has become almost indistinguishable from the reading of 'culture'. . . . In this mode of criticism, literary works have been readily examined as symbolic enactments of material forces; as exemplification of a particular ideology, phenomenon, or a conflict; or as illustrations of the political, economic, and sociological concerns of the times." Sohn, Lai, and Goellnicht detect an emerging scholarly emphasis on literary aesthetics and formal analysis, as distinct from the politics of representation, but consider it too early to tell whether the focus on *how* Asian American writers express themselves rather than on *what* they say will produce a marked disciplinary shift in the character of Asian American literary criticism.

REPRESENTATIVE WORKS

Anthologies

Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers [edited by Jeffery Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Inada, and Shawn Wong] (short stories, essays, and prose extracts) 1974

The Big Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature [edited by Jeffery Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Inada, and Shawn Wong] (short stories, poems, essays, and prose extracts) 1991

Growing Up Asian American [edited by Maria Hong] (essays, short stories, and prose extracts) 1993

Q & A: *Queer in Asian America* [edited by David L. Eng and Alice Y. Hom] (fiction, nonfiction, and artwork) 1998

Representative Authors and Works

Lan Cao

Monkey Bridge (novel) 1998

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha

Dictee (prose) 1982

Patricia Chao

Monkey King: A Novel (novel) 1998

Fiona Cheong

The Scent of the Gods (novel) 1991

Frank Chin

The Chickencoop Chinaman (play) 1972

Gee, Pop (play) 1976

Donald Duk (novel) 1991

Lawrence Chua

Gold by the Inch (novel) 1998

Gish Jen

Typical American (novel) 1991

Mona in the Promised Land (novel) 1996

World and Town: A Novel (novel) 2010

Amitav Ghosh

Sea of Poppies (novel) 2008

Jessica Hagedorn

Dogeaters (novel) 1990

David Henry Hwang

FOB (play) 1979

M. Butterfly (play) 1988

Cynthia Kadohata

In the Heart of the Valley of Love (novel) 1992

Nora Okja Keller

Comfort Woman (novel) 1997

Fox Girl (novel) 2002

Suki Kim

The Interpreter (novel) 2003

Maxine Hong Kingston

Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts (novel) 1976

China Men (short stories) 1980

Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book (novel) 1989

Joy Kogawa

Obasan (novel) 1981

Itsuka (novel) 1992

Chang-rae Lee

Native Speaker (novel) 1995

A Gesture Life (novel) 1999

The Surrendered (novel) 2010

Jhumpa Lahiri

Interpreter of Maladies (short stories) 1999

The Namesake (novel) 2003

Unaccustomed Earth (short stories) 2008

Wendy Law-Yone

The Coffin Tree (novel) 1983

Nam Le

The Boat (short stories) 2008

Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Among the White Moon Faces (memoir) 2001

R. Zamora Linmark

Rolling the R's (novel) 1995

Timothy Liu

Vox Angelica (poetry) 1992

Burnt Offerings (poetry) 1995

Say Goodnight (poetry) 1998

Hard Evidence (poetry) 2001

Bharati Mukherjee

The Middleman and Other Stories (short stories) 1988

Jasmine (novel) 1989

Anchee Min

Red Azalea (memoir) 1994

Fae Myenne Ng

Bone (novel) 1993

Mei Ng

Eating Chinese Food Naked (novel) 1998

Bich Minh Nguyen

Stealing Buddha's Dinner (memoir) 2007

Short Girls (novel) 2009

Han Ong

Fixer Chao (novel) 2001

Ruth Ozeki

My Year of Meats (novel) 1998

All Our Creation (novel) 2003

Ed Park

Personal Days (novel) 2008

Julie Shigekumi

Unending Nora (novel) 2008

Amy Tan

Joy Luck Club (novel) 1989

The Bonesetter's Daughter (novel) 2001

Rules for Virgins (novella) 2011

Jade Snow Wong

Fifth Chinese Daughter (memoir) 1950

Hisaye Yamamoto

Seventeen Syllables: 5 Stories of Japanese American Life (short stories) 1985

THEORIZING ASIAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

Stephen Hong Sohn, Paul Lai, and Donald C. Goellnicht (essay date spring 2010)

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[The following essay forms the introduction to a special issue devoted to "Theorizing Asian American Fiction." The editors of the issue—Sohn, Lai, and Goellnicht—here describe the disciplinary phases of Asian American literary studies and the peculiar definitional challenges it poses.]

In assessing the state of Asian American literary studies, Susan Koshy claims that, "Although substantial historical scholarship has been produced, the field has been weak in theoretical work, especially when compared to Chicano, Native American and African American Studies. The lack of significant theoretical work has affected its development and its capacity to address the stratifications and differences that constitute its distinctness within ethnic studies" (316). Such a statement still holds sway as Asian American literary studies moves boldly into the twenty-first century, where creative productions continue to offer conundrums and challenges to field classification and ordering rubrics. Part of Koshy's critique stems from the

conception of "strategic deferral," what Koshy defines as "an invocation of the work of culture-building that the debates themselves perform, and through which Asian American identity and its concomitant literature would come into being. Unlike African American, Native American or Chicano literature, Asian American literature inhabits the highly unstable temporality of the 'about-to-be,' its meanings continuously reinvented after the arrival of new groups of immigrants and the enactment of legislative changes" (315). Here, strategic deferral marks how literary critics have avoided defining and categorizing what exactly hallmarks, embodies, and characterizes Asian American literature, suspending any boundary making precisely because the contours of the racial community continue to change. What Koshy marks as "strategic deferral" might actually be reconstituted as a way of thinking about the poststructural investments of Asian Americanist critique.¹ Precisely because the term "Asian American" is itself in constant instability, literary field classification and boundaries also must remain malleable and mercurial, open to continued critical negotiation.

A brief survey of Asian Americanist critiques and Asian American social contexts fleshes out the complicated emergence of the field, one that bears repeating if only to demonstrate the continually evolving nature of critical investigations and analytical methodologies. There is now a rough consensus that Asian American literary and cultural studies have gone through three overlapping phases: the cultural nationalist phase of the late 1960s to the late 1970s, the feminist phase that was dominant from the late 1970s through about 1990 (and still ongoing), and the transnational or diasporic phase from about 1990 on. The cultural nationalist phase was epitomized by Frank Chin and the *Aiiieeeee!* editors with an emphasis on racial identity politics founded on American nativity and the English language, and on the project of "claiming America" in decidedly masculinist, militaristic, working-class fashion. The feminist phase (ushered in by Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* in 1976) opposed Chin's masculinist ideology, despite the similarities of their projects in "claiming America"; it later broadened out to deal with the complexities of gender and sexuality more generally, culminating in extensive present engagements with queer studies. The transnational or diasporic phase, initiated by Lisa Lowe's oft-cited article, "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity" (published in the first issue of *diaspora*, 1991), sparked renewed interest in Asian/Asian American transpacific connections and "postnational" concerns.² The diasporic turn is perhaps best exemplified by David Palumbo-Liu's monumental book *Asian/*

American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier (1999) in which Palumbo-Liu traces in emphatic historical detail the mutually constitutive and transformative relationship between “Asia” and “America.” By the end of the 1990s the transnational paradigm was triumphant, with mainstream American historians trumpeting “the transnational turn” and Asian Studies adopting “comparative and transnational” perspectives.³ Most recently, there has been a shift of attention among some scholars toward aesthetics in Asian American literary studies, with care being taken to stress the political dimensions of aesthetics, but it is too early to tell whether this will become a dominant critical trend.⁴

It needs to be stressed that these disciplinary phases are neither distinct (they do not form a neat teleological development) nor are they neutral but different temporalities; rather, they overlap in very significant ways. King-Kok Cheung describes the phases as “a dialectic that continues to spark debate” (1), and Jinqi Ling has warned that the division between early “domestic” and later “diasporic” phases is to some extent arbitrary. Ling emphasizes that cultural history “can develop only contrapuntally,” so that we must constantly be rereading earlier texts for the different (diasporic, transnational) concerns they will reveal in our moment of hyper-globalization, just as we should not forget the founding imperatives of Asian American Studies as we forge ahead into transnationalism (164). As Sucheta Mazumdar reminds us, Asian American cultural nationalism had a strong international component from the outset, with Mao Zedong, Che Guevara, Frantz Fanon, and Amílcar Cabral being major philosophical and political influences and the war in Vietnam having a galvanizing effect on the movement. Asian American activists identified themselves with Third World peoples and causes, and the “internal colonization” model, adapted from the study of colonized peoples and liberation struggles outside of the United States, was a dominant mode of analyzing the Asian American situation. Additionally, the particular relationship of the United States to the Philippines from the 1898 Spanish-American War, through benevolent assimilation and independence struggles and into the postcolonial moment, has led to complex layers of Filipino American migrations, identities, and literatures.⁵ Despite this international influence, however, the early cultural nationalist phase was also strongly nativist, dominated by Chinese and Japanese Americans whose families had been in North America for several generations, with some inclusion of Filipino and Korean Americans. This “Asian

American” group constituted an English-speaking, university-educated class who had become upwardly mobile despite their identification with the working class.

Ironically, at the very moment (1968-1970s) these scholar-activists were coming into their own, the Asian North American demographic was changing with the implementation of the 1965 and 1967 immigration acts in the US and Canada, respectively. The later diasporic/transnational phase reflects these massive demographic shifts, which have brought much more diverse Asian populations to North America in larger numbers. Southeast Asians, South Asians, and West or Arab Asians have led to greater diversity of languages, classes, religions, and political beliefs within the umbrella term “Asian American,” such was the diversity that in fact Shirley Geok-lin Lim asserted “Asian American” was a term “both exceedingly contemporary . . . and already collapsing under the weight of its own contradictions” (162). So significant have these demographic shifts been that by the end of the twentieth century, the majority of Asian Americans and Asian Canadians were born outside of the US and Canada, and did not speak English as their first language, a situation very different from that in 1968 when Asian American Studies was forming as a field. These demographic shifts have had a significant impact on the field’s understanding of its own “originary” forces and narratives, as well as on the kinds of fiction being produced; however, the term “Asian American” has not disappeared, despite predictions of its demise.

We should also acknowledge that, as Viet Thanh Nguyen reminds us, we cannot now assume, if we ever could, that all Asian Americans share the “left-of-center” ideology of “the Asian American intellectual class” (13). The diversity of political opinion in Asian North American communities—including considerable support for right wing parties and neoconservative causes—becomes increasingly apparent. Asian American fiction, reflecting the diversity of Asian American communities, encompasses very diverse subject matter and form. As we continue to study the breadth of this fiction, we must develop shifting understandings both of demographic changes in Asian America as well as of how our critical investments shape which authors and texts emerge as privileged subjects of analysis.

Conceptualizing Asian American fiction as a chameleonic body is essential precisely because field organization has rested primarily on the unstable relationship between textual content and the writer’s racial descent. The instability that exists at the juncture of authorial descent and textual content is exemplified by the