

WOMEN WRITERS OF ENGLISH AND THEIR WORKS

**Asian-
American
Women
Writers**

Edited and with an Introduction by
Harold Bloom

CHELSEA HOUSE PUBLISHERS
Philadelphia

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THE ANALYSIS OF WOMEN WRITERS

HAROLD BLOOM

I APPROACH THIS SERIES with a certain wariness, since so much of classical feminist literary criticism has founded itself upon arguments with that phase of my own work that began with *The Anxiety of Influence* (first published in January 1973). Someone who has been raised to that bad eminence—*The Patriarchal Critic*—is well advised that he trespasses upon sacred ground when he ventures to inquire whether indeed there are indisputable differences, imaginative and cognitive, between the literary works of women and those of men. If these differences are so substantial as pragmatically to make an authentic difference, does that in turn make necessary different aesthetic standards for judging the achievements of men and of women writers? Is Emily Dickinson to be read as though she has more in common with Elizabeth Barrett Browning than with Ralph Waldo Emerson?

Is Elizabeth Bishop a great poet because she triumphantly meets the same aesthetic criteria satisfied by Wallace Stevens, or should we evaluate her by criteria she shares with Marianne Moore, but not with Stevens? Are there crucial gender-based differences in the representations of Esther Summerson by Charles Dickens in *Bleak House*, and of Dorothea Brooke by George Eliot in *Middlemarch*? Does Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa Harlowe* convince us that her author was a male when we contrast her with Jane Austen's Elizabeth Bennet? Do women poets have a less agonistic relationship to female precursors than male poets have to their forerunners? Two eminent pioneers of feminist criticism, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, have suggested that women writers suffer more from an anxiety of authorship than they do from influence anxieties, while another important feminist critic, Elaine Showalter, has suggested that women writers, early and late, work together in a kind of quilting, each doing her share while avoiding any contamination of creative envy in regard to other writers, provided that they be women. Can it be true that, in the aesthetic sphere, women do not beware women and do not suffer from the competitiveness and jealousy that alas do exist in the professional and sexual domains? Is there something in the area of literature, when practiced by women, that changes and purifies mere human nature?

I cannot answer any of these questions, yet I do think it is vital and clarifying to raise them. There is a current fashion, in many of our institutions of higher education, to insist that English Romantic poetry cannot be studied in the old way, with an exclusive emphasis upon the works of William Blake,

William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats, and John Clare. Instead, the Romantic poets are taken to include Felicia Hemans, Laetitia Landon, Charlotte Smith, and Mary Tighe, among others. It would be heartening if we could believe that these are unjustly neglected poets, but their current revival will be brief. Similarly, anthologies of 17th-century English literature now tend to include the Duchess of Newcastle as well as Aphra Behn, Lady Mary Chudleigh, Anne Killigrew, Anne Finch, Countess of Winchelsea, and others. Some of these—Anne Finch in particular—wrote well, but a situation in which they are more read and studied than John Milton is not one that is likely to endure forever. The consequences of making gender a criterion for aesthetic choice must finally destroy all serious study of imaginative literature as such.

In their *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar conclude their introduction to Elizabeth Barrett Browning by saying that "she constantly tested herself against the highest standards of male-defined poetic genres," a true if ambiguous observation. They then print her famous "The Cry of the Children," an admirably passionate ode that protests the cruel employment of little children in British Victorian mines and factories. Unfortunately, this well-meant prophetic affirmation ends with this, doubtless its finest stanza:

XIII

They look up with their pale and sunken faces,
And their look is dread to see,
For they mind you of their angels in high places,
With eyes turned on Deity.
"How long," they say, "how long, O cruel nation,
— Will you stand, to move — world, on a child's heart,—
Stifle down with a mailed heel its palpitating,
And tread onward to your throne amid the mart?
Our blood splashes upward, O goldheaper,
And your purple shows your path!
But the child's sob in the silence curses deeper
Than the strong man in his wrath."

If you read this aloud, then you may find yourself uncomfortable, on a strictly aesthetic basis, which would not vary if you were told that this had been composed by a male Victorian poet. In their selections from Elizabeth Bishop, Gilbert and Gubar courageously reprint Bishop's superb statement explaining her refusal to permit her poems to be included in anthologies of women's writing:

Undoubtedly gender does play an important part in the making of any art, but art is art and to separate writings, paintings, musical compositions, etc., into sexes is to emphasize values in them that are not art.

That credo of Elizabeth Bishop's is to me the Alpha and Omega of critical wisdom in regard to all feminist literary criticism. Gender studies are precisely that: they study gender, and not aesthetic value. If your priorities are historical, social, political, and ideological, then gender studies clearly are more than justified. Perhaps they are a way to justice, or at least to more justice than women have received throughout thousands of years of male domination and aggression. Yet that is a very different matter from the now vexed issue of aesthetic value. Biographical criticism, like the different modes of historicist and psychological criticism, always has relied upon a kind of implicit gender studies and doubtless will benefit, as other modes will, by a making explicit of such considerations, particularly in regard to women writers.

Each volume in this series contains copious refutations of, and replies to, the traditionally aesthetic stance that I have advocated here. These introductory remarks aspire only to a questioning, and not a challenging, of feminist literary criticism. There are no longer any Patriarchal Critics; they are all dinosaurs, fabulous beasts fit for revival only in horror films. Sometimes I sadly think of myself as Bloom Brontosaurus, amiably left behind by the fire and the flood. But more often I go on reading the great women writers, searching for the aesthetic difference that yet may prove to be there, but which has not yet been found.

I N T R O D U C T I O N

BY GENERAL CONSENT, the most influential narratives in Chinese-American literature to date are Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989). I want to contrast Hong Kingston's "No Name Woman" to Tan's "Two Kinds," each excerpted from the now famous fictive autobiographies.

One of my growing convictions, founded upon the last 20 or so of my more than 40 years of teaching at Yale University, is that the life of the mind and the spirit in the United States will be dominated by Asian Americans in the opening decades of the 21st century. The intellectuals—the women and men of literature and the other arts, of science and scholarship, and of the learned professions—are emerging from the various Asian-American peoples. In this displacement, the roles once played in American culture and society by the children of Jewish immigrants to the United States are passing to the children of Asian immigrants, and a new phase of American literature will be one of the consequences. *The Woman Warrior* and *The Joy Luck Club* are likely someday to be seen as transitional works, early instances of something much stronger to which nevertheless they have contributed.

"No Name Woman" is Kingston's horrifying account of a doomed aunt, necessarily unknown to her niece, since her memory emerges only from one of the stories told by Kingston's mother. A ghastly, poignant figure from the family's Chinese past, the aunt drowned herself and her baby in a well because of the terrible persecution visited upon her family and herself by the other villagers when they realized she was about to bear an illegitimate child. After the villagers wreck the family's house and crops, the wretched aunt is repudiated by her relatives and told that she herself is an unborn ghost. Devastated by the rejection, the No Name Woman kills both the baby and herself. Kingston, her aunt's only memorialist, renders an ambiguous and powerful summation that is neither elegy nor tribute:

In the twenty years since I heard this story I have not asked for details nor said my aunt's name; I do not know it. People who can comfort the dead can also chase after them to hurt them further—a reverse ancestor worship. The real punishment was not the raid swiftly inflicted by the villagers, but the family's deliberately forgetting her. Her betrayal so maddened them, they saw to it that she would suffer forever, even after death. Always hungry, always needing, she would have to beg food from other ghosts, snatch and steal it from those whose living descendants give them gifts. She would have to fight the ghosts massed at crossroads for the buns a few thoughtful citizens leave to decoy her away from village and home so

that the ancestral spirits could feast untroubled. At peace, they could act like gods, not ghosts, their descent lines providing them with paper suits and dresses, spirit money, paper houses, paper automobiles, chicken, meat, and rice into eternity—essences delivered up in smoke and flames, steam and incense rising from each rice bowl. In an attempt to make the Chinese care for people outside the family, Chairman Mao encourages us now to give our paper replicas to the spirits of outstanding soldiers and workers, no matter whose ancestors they may be. My aunt remains forever hungry. Goods are not evenly distributed among the dead.

My aunt haunts me—her ghost drawn to me because now, after fifty years of neglect, I alone devote pages of paper to her, though not origami-ed into houses and clothes. I do not think she always means me well. I am telling on her, and she was a spite suicide, drowning herself in the drinking water. The Chinese are always very frightened of the drowned one, whose weeping ghost, wet hair hanging and skin bloated, waits silently by the water to pull down a substitute.

Is this also an instance of "reverse ancestor worship"? Clearly not, since Kingston both pities and fears her aunt's memory, or ghost: "My aunt remains always hungry." Beyond the fanciful play with superstition, the passage's resonance depends upon its ambivalent response to a village culture where adultery was an extravagance and so, in bad years, a crime. Kingston's ghosts find their literary effectiveness in their narrator's ambivalence, which is fascinated, yet also appalled, by the ancestral world of violence, paternalism, and repressed individuality.

Tan's "Two Kinds," in contrast, centers entirely upon a Chinese-American mother-daughter relationship, dominated by the mother's possessive love and ambition for her child, who rebels against the mother's expectations of a musical genius that the child simply does not have:

She yanked me by the arm, pulled me off the floor, snapped off the TV. She was frighteningly strong, half pulling, half carrying me toward the piano as I kicked the throw rugs under my feet. She lifted me up and onto the hard bench. I was sobbing by now, looking at her bitterly. Her chest was heaving even more and her mouth was open, smiling crazily as if she were pleased I was crying.

"You want me to be someone I'm not!" I sobbed. "I'll never be the kind of daughter you want me to be!"

"Only two kinds of daughters," she shouted in Chinese. "Those who are obedient and those who follow their own mind! Only one kind of daughter can live in this house. Obedient daughter!"

"Then I wish I wasn't your daughter. I wish you weren't my mother," I shouted. As I said these things I got scared. I felt like worms and toads and slimy things were crawling out of my chest, but it also felt good, as if this awful side of me had surfaced, at last.

"Too late change this," said my mother shrilly.

And I could sense her anger rising to its breaking point. I wanted to see it spill over. And that's when I remembered the babies she had lost in China, the ones we never talked about. "Then I wish I'd never been born!" I shouted. "I wish I were dead! Like them."

It was as if I had said the magic words, *Alakazam!*—and her face went blank, her mouth closed, her arms went slack, and she backed out of the room, stunned, as if she were blowing away like a small brown leaf, thin, brittle, lifeless.

It is a different order of writing from Kingston's, the style demotic rather than high, and the storytelling art unhaunted by village mythologies. Yet in a lower key it affords something of Kingston's ambivalent study of the nostalgias for a lost world. The dead babies transform the mother's movement into a ghostly image of "blowing away like a small brown leaf, thin, brittle, lifeless." That image allies Tan to the more elaborate art of storytelling that Kingston also quarries ultimately out of the Chinese-American mother-daughter relationship.

Diana Chang

b. 1934

DIANA CHANG was born in 1934 in New York City to a Eurasian mother and Chinese father. She spent her early childhood in Beijing and Shanghai, however, until her family fled Communist China and returned to New York, where Chang's father began work as an architect. In New York, Chang attended high school and Barnard College, where she studied creative writing and read, among others, existentialist philosophers; she has said that she was especially affected by Kierkegaard. After graduating, she worked full time as a junior editor at various publishing houses but finally quit, despite economic difficulties, so that she could spend more time writing.

Her first novel, *The Frontiers of Love*, was published in 1956 to much critical acclaim. Five other novels and three collections of poetry followed. Pursuing "universal" themes, Chang has said that she often subsumes aspects of her Eurasian background "in the interests of other truths and recognitions"; one of her abiding preoccupations has been the issue of identity. Her work has also appeared in magazines, including *American Scholar*, *Nation*, *New Letters*, *New York Quarterly*, and *Virginia Quarterly Review*. She is an accomplished painter as well and has exhibited her work in solo and group shows.

Chang has taught creative writing and interdisciplinary art courses at Barnard College and currently lives in Water Mill, New York.

C R I T I C A L E X T R A C T S

SAMANTHA RAMA RAU

The pathos and the problems of the Eurasian in Asia have, for a long time, interested Westerners, sometimes from the point of view of the Eurasians' anomalous political position, and sometimes (notably in the writing of Joseph Hittler and John Masters) because of their emotional complexities. It is relatively seldom, however, that one is given a convincing and interior view of the Eurasian world, written, so to speak, from the inside looking out and embracing both the political and emotional dilemmas of that twilight no-man's-land.

Whether or not Diana Chang's "The Frontiers of Love" is largely autobiographical is a matter of complete irrelevance, for she brings to the background and descriptive detail of her story an authenticity that stands up equally well

fact or fiction. She has chosen for the setting of her novel a bleak period in the history of China in general and of Shanghai in particular—the stagnant, demoralized life of the last weeks of the Japanese Occupation, and the chaotic months following.

Her chief characters are all Eurasians or Chinese and foreigners inextricably entangled in the Eurasian situation. (. . .)

Within their narrow orbit all of them try to work out their own destinies and convictions and satisfactions. (. . .)

Meanwhile some of the "neutrals," some of the other Eurasians, some of the foreigners married to Chinese, dream of escape, identity, security in America, in Europe, anywhere except Shanghai.

If Miss Chang's sense of characterization—intense and painfully honest as it often is—needs some extra authority and experience, the reader is amply compensated in her fine sense of a city's atmosphere and moods, in a lovely and moving description of a child's view of Peiping, in her feeling for that tragically ineffectual figure—the creature destined for betrayal—the Chinese liberal.

—Samantha Rama Rau, "The Need to Belong," *The New York Times Book Review* (23 September 1956): 4, 26

KENNETH REXROTH

Diana Chang has written of a miniature society entrapped and suspended, a social Mohammed's coffin, a space platform lost beyond the moon. Yet, of all the novels of the Far East published this season, her book, at least for me, has most reality. Partly it is because her people are more like you and me, more typically part of the world-wide community of a sick Western society than Japanese fishermen or wastrel poets, and so more accessible; partly it is because Chinese civilization, which after all is still their strong foundation, is, in spite of all its current vicissitudes, a deeper and richer thing than Japanese; partly it is a matter of style. Miss Chang's style may not be faultless, but it is certainly personal, and it is more alive, more gripping, than even the best translation. Then, too, all the world can be reflected in a mirror on a space station, however lost, and so she has managed to embody much, if not all, of the forces acting on human beings caught in the maelstrom of total transvaluation which is the twentieth-century Far East. Like the situation, her characters are dramatically "pure," almost like Ben Jonson's humors—imperialists; international gadabouts; aging liberal Chinese incapable of decision; a youth from the countryside, spontaneously, organically revolutionary, who is crushed by the blind melodrama of organized "revolution"; and the women, all of them seeking love, all of them losing it, and one of them, a rather autobiographical-sounding heroine, at least finding a kind of personal integrity in tragedy and

betrayal. Once again, it is the same message as in so many of these novels, "Out of this nettle, alienation, we pluck this flower, integrity." Not very many first novels are written with as much skill and insight.

—Kenneth Rexroth, "World Ills in the Far East," *The Nation* (29 September 1956): 272

JANICE BISHOP

What Matisse Is After is poetry with an economy of language as elegantly inclusive as the line and motion rendered by the French master himself. To read these poems exploring paradoxical perception is to breathe in the rhythmic interplay of word, image, idea, feeling. Each synthesizes one into the other, simulating change which, like the lines of Matisse, are a *departure / toward returning / in the teeth of our dying*.

Natural, human, and aesthetic experience are mutually transposed in "As Green Comes." Generated by breath/spirit the appearance of poems is analogous to both the pubescent breasts of girls and nature's budding. Significantly, in "A Double Pursuit," the painter signs not the perishable canvas but ephemeral air, the spirit's mode. Light/energy are synecdochic of spirit infusing meaning. Many poems emit a phosphorescent glow. In "Wonder" personified light reflects itself enabling us to see objects. Through light a person becomes extraordinary. (. . .)

Although Diana Chang uses ethnic referents, she moves outside the boundaries of ethnicity. In "On Gibson Lane, Sagaponack" she speaks of her Chinese strangeness in an Anglo culture. Yet, she and a blond girl share the experience of riding *along the same edge* of being; each mysteriously evolving, then returning to self.

In "Twelve-Year-Olds," the room which is a *tunnel* is given motion by the dance of blossoming pre-adolescents. As mantises, they are both prophets and insects groping with *tuxedo-elegance*, as if *praying* against a backdrop of *centuries of jungles*.

What Matisse Is After opens and closes in perfect symmetry. A surge of green transposing into growing bodies of girls, like Matisse's women effortlessly filling space, returns as nature's disordered dance. Energy languorously evolving, convoluting the animistic and human, instinctively flourishes.

—Janice Bishop, [Review of *What Matisse Is After*], *The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian American Women's Anthology*, ed. Shirley Lim and Mayumi Tsutakawa (Corvallis, OR: Calyx Books, 1989), 242–43

AMY LING

In *Frontiers of Love*, Chang makes clear that one's identity is the sum of all of one's past, not the choice of one half of one's ancestry at the expense of the

her, the mistake made by Feng Huang and Mimi Lambert. For Sylvia Chen and for Diana Chang, this past includes nostalgic memories of early childhood in Peiping (Beijing) (. . .) How different is Diana Chang's sun—"the boldness, the lustiness, the fullblown wonder of solid sunlight"—from Eileen Chang's (no relation) exhausted sun—lying "across the street like an old yellow dog, barring the way"—in *The Rice Sprout Song*. In this passage, Diana Chang strongly affirms the centrality of her own past. The depth of feeling for these childhood memories of her natal city goes beyond fondness or affection; it is an attachment like an umbilical cord: the central and essential sustenance necessary to the life of every adult. Chang makes no apologies but simply and boldly states that everyone's "first memories . . . should be under the Peiping sky." This proud assertion counteracts the painfully alienated description of Pelyuan's Chinese ugliness. Taken together, the two passages express the double consciousness of what it means to be Chinese in a white world. (. . .)

The golden memory of Peiping is but the foundation for building a cosmopolitanism and expatriation "free from any narrow chauvinism." Indeed, for Diana Chang "to be Chinese was not enough," for her five later novels, with a single minor exception, do not have Chinese or Amerasian characters in them at all. Asked why her later protagonists were all Caucasian, she replied that "exoticism" can stand in the way of the "universal" she strives for in her themes and, therefore, she has "often subsumed aspects of her background in the interest of other truths." Asked why a Chinese or Chinese American can't also be "universal," she responded that we are living in the United States and "Everyman" here is white. Though an ethnic minority writer is not bound to write of her own ethnicity, as women writers are not bound to create only heroines nor to adopt a feminist perspective, nonetheless, prolonged avoidance of that which is closest to one's self when self-hood is one's major theme is a difficult stand to defend. The explanation may be that Diana Chang's formative years were spent in the United States, in New York City, during the McCarthy era, when all Americans, including Chinese Americans, had to disavow everything having to do with a Communist country, and China, of course, was Communist. Thus, the central characters of five of her six novels are white Anglo-Saxon Protestants with the occasional "exotic," a Jew. In her poetry and recent short fiction, however, Chang has treated Chinese American subjects.

—Amy Ling, *Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry* (Elmsford, NY: Pergamon Press, 1990), 118–19

AMY LING

Writing is an act of self-assertion, self-revelation, and self-preservation. One writes out of a delight in one's storytelling powers, out of a need to reveal and

explain oneself, or from a desire to record and preserve experience. However, for women brought up in the old Chinese tradition that for eighteen hundred years codified their obedience and submission to the men in their lives—father, husband, son—a tradition that stressed female chastity, modesty, and restraint; that broke girls' toes and bound their feet as an ideal of beauty; that sold daughters into slavery in times of hardship; that encouraged and honored widow suicides—any writing at all was unusual, even an act of rebellion. (. . .) Furthermore, since it was the Chinese custom to leave the women at home when the men first immigrated, temporarily they thought, to the Gold Mountain to make their fortunes, the number of Chinese women in America was small. In 1852, for example, of the 11,794 Chinese in California, only 7 were women, and most of these were prostitutes. (. . . The) numbers of Chinese women in the United States did not approach equality with Chinese men until 1954. Thus it is not surprising that we have so little writing by Chinese American women; it is notable that we have so much. (. . .)

(. . . The) majority of Chinese American works are by immigrants and sojourners, daughters of diplomats and scholars, and those who have had contact with the West through missionaries or mission schools. For the immigrant, the very act of choosing to write in English, a second language, and thereby addressing a predominantly Caucasian audience is significant and colors the purpose and nature of the work. (. . .) Immigrant and sojourner Chinese American writers (. . .) seek primarily to explain and justify China and Chinese ways to the Western world. (. . .) Transplanted after their formative years, they see their role in the West as interpreters and ambassadors of good will and understanding for China; to borrow David Riesman's term, they are "other-directed."

American-born Chinese American writers, (. . .) however, tend to be more individualistic and to have an inward focus. Because they have grown up as a racial minority, imbibing the customs of two cultures, their centers are not stable and single. Their consciousness, as W. E. B. Du Bois pointed out for African Americans, is double; their vision bifocal and fluctuating. Therefore, they look inward with an urgency to comprehend and balance the bicultural clashes they have known and must reconcile. That they write and publish is of course indicative of an awareness of an external world and a desire to communicate, but their initial impetus is primarily introspective. Their purpose is to explain themselves to themselves. (. . .)

With two exceptions, Diana Chang's books have nothing to do with Chinese or Chinese Americans. Her first work, *Frontiers of Love*, a rich, full novel set in Shanghai at the close of World War II, is the story of three young Eurasians, representing the spectrum of possibilities in the struggle to determine their identities. (. . .) Chang, who is three-quarters Chinese and one-

quarter Irish but by upbringing an American, (like her character Sylvia Chen) acts for herself instead of reacting and goes her own way in her other novels.

Chang chooses in her later books to focus on modern varieties of love: love after divorce, in *A Woman of Thirty*; love for an unborn child, even if it is the result of rape, in *A Passion for Life*; interracial love between a Caucasian Peace Corps volunteer and a Chinese Communist dancer, in the minor, farcical *The Only Game in Town*; love as a manifestation of neurosis, in the clever *Eye to Eye*, in which a married white Protestant artist falls in love with a Jewish writer and seeks the help of a psychiatrist; extramarital love between an older woman and a younger man, in *A Perfect Love*. She writes with great skill of Ivy League graduates, artists, writers, publishers, who inhabit the world of New York City, Long Island, Massachusetts. Her characters tend to be blue-eyed Anglo-Saxons; the outsiders are Jews. "Fitness, in evolutionary biology," says the biologist Lewis Thomas, "means fitting in with the rest of life. If a species is good at this, it tends to survive" (32). Like Winnifred Eaton, Diana Chang is conscious of her audience and wants to fit in, to survive; she "subsumes aspects of her background in the interests of other truths" (qtd. in Ling, "Writer" 75), truths she believes will have a broader appeal in the society in which she lives.

—Amy Ling, "Chinese American Women Writers: The Tradition behind Maxine Hong Kingston," *Redefining American Literary History*, ed. A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff and Jerry W. Ward, Jr. (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1990), 219–20, 233

SHIRLEY GEOK-LIN LIM

The theme of being in the world can be seen not solely as a search for identity but as a quest for selfness. It is a theme that has resonated in American literature from the opening line in *Moby-Dick*, "Call me Ishmael," to Ralph Ellison's "I am the invisible man." To a writer such as Diana Chang, plot and characterization, no longer mere devices to explore ethnicity or to protest political trauma, become the means by which characters' selves evolve or are examined. In Chang's novels, the questions of stereotypes, ethnicity, duality, and the forging of a new identity fall under a larger existentialist theme. In most of the works of the Asian American writers discussed so far, authorial identity is indistinguishable from the author's ethnic identity; but Chang is a protean author, a master of disguises whose authorial identity cannot be fixed by ethnicity. In *Eye to Eye*, her fifth novel, for example, the narrator and main character is a white Anglo-Saxon American male married to a long-legged blonde and infatuated with a Jewish woman. What frees Chang to explore the broader oceans of consciousness is her ability to construct alternative points of view. Obviously influenced by Ford Madox Ford, her secular, urban fictions express an intense consciousness of self through this manipulation.

Her first novel, *The Frontiers of Love*, shows her early, abiding attachment to a form of controlling mask and masking control. Begun as an inchoate personal narrative, it was reworked into fiction through the creation of five characters caught in the inertia and anarchy of wartime Shanghai. Through their points of view, Chang examines the inadequacy of racial identity in providing us with a sense of self. Through the tragedies of two young Eurasians, Mimi and Feng Huang, we learn that the alienated and unreflecting self, in its desperation to escape the terrors of freedom (that is, absence of racial belonging), destroys itself. Sylvia, the third Eurasian, alone knows that "if one did not hold on carefully to one's sense of self, one might wake up some morning looking for one's face, so easily lost" (87). Sylvia escapes self-destruction, for in her absence of narrow commitment to race is her capacity for insight. Aware of her dual racial origins, she is unwilling to sacrifice one for the other; aware of the individual's vulnerability in search of self-definition, she is capable of objectivity. Her search for point of view is finally more authentic than "a single comforting bias" (18). The novel ends with Liyi's, Sylvia's father's, vision that "life was not to be resolved, but to be lived—a constant improvisation" (245). The spontaneous creation of self in its encounters with the world, a brave existentialist answer to the question of identity, is Chang's special contribution to Asian American literature.

According to Irving Howe, "what usually shapes a new literary movement is less a common future than a common rejection of the recently dominant past." It is clear in Asian American writing that those literary works that most exploit the dominant stereotypes of their racial history are less powerfully works of imagination. When Asian American writers reject the "recently dominant past," choosing instead, like Kingston and Chang, to construct the fiction of a memory that never took place, their work becomes empowered with the consciousness of literary text.

—Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Twelve Asian American Writers: In Search of Self-Definition," *Redefining American Literary History*, ed. A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff and Jerry W. Ward, Jr. (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1990), 249

L. M. GROW

In "Four Views of Reality," published in *The American Scholar* 25:1 (1955–56): 67–68, Diana Chang treats, respectively, painting, music, and poetry in the first three poems and illustrates the applications of all three in the fourth poem. Each of these arts is a means of escape from the Euclidean world of restriction, where "the circling of infinity" incarcerates the human spirit: "Nowhere in Manhattan does Euclid cease. / Music sings drily into toneless equations."

Paradoxically, imagination creates freedom not from vast vistas but in "imagination's small society," whether the dimension is horizontal ("New England's blue geography"), as in the first poem, or vertical, as in the second ("Music is prismatic among these heights, / [in Manhattan] . . . dumb warm circuits dominate / A low, miraculous firmament of air"). In the case of "hosannas to truth," the "human position" (metaphysical posture?, existential predicament?) is a "fiction" if it is measured in longitude and latitude. If one wishes to map essence, the "dumb warm circuits" of the hosannas to truth, not the circles of infinity, must be used for the purpose. (. . .)

"Four Views in Praise of Reality" is a subtle, finely-wrought, thoughtful set of poems, and that judgment can be tested by the stanzaic structure as well as by a close examination of the content. The first poem's stanzas are, respectively, a quatrain and two tercets. Poems two and four consist entirely of tercets, and poem number three exclusively of quatrains. The balance of quatrain to tercet found in poem number one has a mirror image in the succeeding three verses, containing as they do collectively six tercets and three quatrains. This two-to-one ratio is inversely present in the two quatrains and one tercet of poem number one. To extend this numerical count one step further, we might note one of the most readily apparent features of this quartet: there are four poems, each of which contains three stanzas. Threes and fours are juxtaposed meaningfully but not mechanically, so that we have a temptation to interpret the numerical significance but no clear-cut answers after we have done so. Do we have four views (and quatrain construction in parts) because the classical division of the earth's elements was into four parts? Do tercets abound because three has from antiquity been a number symbolic of a perfect, finished state? Is there a useful conclusion to be derived from the intermixing of an even (four) and an odd (three) number? Does their arithmetical total of seven, with that number's long history of connotations, have a design behind it? The richness and subtlety of response possible is itself Diana Chang's escape from the Euclidean world of restriction—and this escape becomes, after we have carefully read "Four Views in Praise of Reality" our escape as well.

—L. M. Grow, "On Diana Chang's 'Four Views in Praise of Reality,'" *Amerasia Journal* 16, no. 1 (1990): 211, 214–15

SAU-LING CYNTHIA WONG

Diana Chang's 1989 short story, "The Oriental Contingent," provides ancillary evidence that culture is a relatively insignificant factor in Asian American versions of the double. This story explores the ambivalence of American-born Chinese who feel *inferior* for being assimilated. Connie Sung, a third-

generation pianist, meets a Chinese American woman with the name of Lisa Mallory, which Connie assumes comes from marrying a Caucasian. For three or four years after their first meeting, Connie is plagued by bewilderment at Lisa's aloofness. Considering herself a "failed Chinese" (174), Connie concludes that Lisa must be "Chinese-Chinese" (173); the latter's reticence must be a matter of tact, to protect the feelings of the less fortunate.

Finally, at a chance encounter, Lisa confesses to Connie that she was born in Buffalo and adopted by white parents. The two women have in fact been feeling defensive toward each other, each believing the other to be more Chinese, each trying to hide her own lack of cultural authenticity. They have been each other's ethnic "secret sharer," so to speak. Lisa exclaims: "The only time I feel Chinese is when I'm embarrassed I'm not more Chinese—which is a totally Chinese reflex that I'd give anything to be rid of!" Connie knows that "none of this matters to anybody except us" but cannot help feeling cursed.

"It's only Orientals who haunt me!" Lisa stamped her foot. "Only them!"

"I'm so sorry," Connie Sung said, for all of them.

"It's all so turned around." (177)

While Chang's short story is so sketchy that all our inferences must be tentative, the sense of tension, fascination, and haunting that the two characters feel toward each other suggests a possible reading of the story as one of the double, with this critical difference: that everything about the two main characters is "turned around," a mirror image of the situation in (Maxine Hong Kingston's) *The Woman Warrior* or (Monica Sone's) *Nisei Daughter*. Connie and Lisa feel stigmatized and diminished for being too Americanized. They have internalized the disdain that "Chinese-Chinese" hold for the American-born. Each woman projects onto the other all the strengths that she wishes she had: direct access to the Chinese community, familiarity with Chinese culture, self-assurance, security of identity. The "Asian" side of the self, not the "American," is the favored one.

Now if cultural conflict could adequately account for the phenomenon of the racial shadow, we would expect to see more stories like "The Oriental Contingent," for then both the "Asian" and the "American" aspects of the self would have an equal chance to be repressed and projected. What we find instead is that the theoretical possibility hinted at in "The Oriental Contingent" is hardly ever actualized in Asian American literature, for the simple reason that the prevailing asymmetry in interracial relationships makes such actualization unlikely. For Asian Americans, incomplete assimilation to white standards is more liable to create embarrassment or insecurity than

lapses from Asian standards, which are not taken into account by those who dominate the power structure of the country.

—Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 98–99

SHIRLEY GEOK-LIN LIM

The Frontiers of Love was first published in 1956 to much acclaim. But nowhere was it hailed then as an Asian American work. The republication of Diana Chang's formidable first novel by the University of Washington Press is a belated recognition that the novel is one of the earliest transgressors of canonical frontiers. It queried categories of identity—national, racial, class, and gender—at a time when American readers in the main were not merely unmindful of issues of diversity but when powerful state forces were inimical to any suggestions of deviance from the jingoistic and hysterical brand of patriotism that Joseph McCarthy had hijacked as his terrain. (. . .)

Set in 1945, *The Frontiers of Love* was already in some ways a historical novel when it appeared in 1956. The experiences it represented, of the Second World War's exiled and interned characters in Japanese-occupied Shanghai, are even further removed for the generation of readers in the last decade of the twentieth century. Thus, in crucial ways, the novel must be read in its historical context. The dilatory yet tense, superficially pleasure-loving yet paranoid intensity of the novel's social world suggests the tenor of relations in a specific cosmopolitan milieu in response to eight years of militaristic rule. The novel constructs the sensibility of a particular society undergoing a crisis of an interregnum: the characters are isolated individuals thrown together by the political violence of war into an inescapable community of transients, exiles, aliens, and sojourners, each seeking solace and satisfaction in the constrained space of a hostile occupied territory. (. . .)

(The) Westernized milieu of Shanghai dominates *The Frontiers of Love*. As Sylvia Chen notes in the novel, "The Shanghai which she knew was circumscribed, uncontaminated by the Chinese section, which she had never even visited" (p. 85). Yet in the novel's self-conscious gaps, its self-reflexive interrogations of its own settings, lies a strict condemnation of Western colonialism and its cultural consequences, the anomie, alienation, deracination, and psychopolitical depredations in the wake of Western imperialism. The Shanghai cosmopolites were "unnamed hybrids," "survivors of a colonialism that was fast becoming as antique as peace" (p. 86). Embedded in Chinese society, colonialist racism "held them apart (from the Chinese) in a trance" (p. 87).

Chang's fictive commentary on the problematic of the colonized is contemporary with Frantz Fanon's study of the colonized in *Black Skin, White Masks*

(first published in Paris in 1952): "People were true to nothing in Shanghai; they belonged only to the surface values of both East and West and leaned heavily toward the exoticism of the West. If one did not hold on carefully to one's sense of self, one might wake up one morning looking for one's face, so easily lost" (p. 87). The sentence expresses both nostalgia for a truth, for those deeper values of a culture, whether East or West, that can provide an individual with a sense of unity and coherence, and a consciousness of its unavailability. "Face" here signifies not merely the physicality that functions as a marker of race and thus of cultural identity but more complexly the Chinese notion of self-respect within a society, that is, the specific social positions of individuals. The consciousness of a Chinese majority shut out of the foreground of dramatic action gives the novel its complicating thematics of race and culture.

Shanghai as a metaphor for a historical and political identity reminds us that the boundaries which we think of as defining national, cultural, racial, gender, and other identities are inherently unstable. As political and epistemological construction, Shanghai was both Chinese and Western, native and foreign, liberatory and oppressive, national and international. Like the three major youthful characters (Sylvia, Feng, and Mimi), it literalizes the identity "Eurasian": "Shanghai [was] a Eurasian city" (93). As Feng, the son of a neurasthenic Englishwoman and remote Chinese father, acknowledges, it is Shanghai's duplicity, its Western colonized culture, that contributes to his identity confusion: "Strictly speaking, it could not be called Chinese, though it was inhabited mostly by Chinese—Chinese who were either wealthy, Westernized or prayed to a Christian God" (p. 21). For Feng, questing for ego coherence and unity which he has conceptualized as single-race identity, such cultural doubleness, figured in the material culture of Shanghai, is intolerable.

Thus the novel is not simply a historical novel, although it offers pleasures even on that limited level. In its almost faultless structuring of multiple points of view it plays out obsessive interrogations and reinscriptions of identity that deconstruct the usual notions of national, racial, class, and gender identities into their phenomenological and epistemological brittleness. As policed borders or as cultural and racial expression, the novel represents Shanghai as the site of violent fragmenting identities, of conflicting evolving and contingent futures. The frontiers "of love" delineate the psychosexual and sociopolitical processes, the "imaginings" through which individuals and nations unmake and make themselves.

—Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Introduction" to *The Frontiers of Love* by Diana Chang (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), v–ix

LEO HAMALIAN

(Diana Chang:) (. . .) At the time that *The Frontiers of Love* was published, most of the very favorable reviews seemed to take it simply as a novel, a literary effort. Can it be said that there was some merit in that? I believe so at least part of the time.

I wasn't pigeonholed by the mainstream press. In fact, misunderstood in ethnic circles that both adopted and disapproved of it, it was a novel some of them tried to force into an ideological Procrustes bed, regarding it as a novel about minority characters living in this country. I was quite baffled, truth to tell. I knew the book is set entirely in Shanghai, China, and while it is about identity, it is not about ethnicity here. I hope everyone will read Shirley Lim's introduction (. . .)

My Chinese characters are not particularly exotic, and one can wonder why. Is it because their middle-classness frees them from characteristics the average American reader looks for in Asians, traits that perhaps they find appealingly different from their own and foreign enough to escape the humdrum, and therefore are picturesque? Everyone is eager for a change of scene, after all.

A contemporary Chinese physician, professor or lawyer in Hong Kong, Beijing or Taipei is not so different in his values, outlook and goals for himself and his children from his counterpart in New York City or Minneapolis. He is not necessarily deeply steeped only in his own traditional customs and mores, folklore, superstitions, and mindset. (They're reading Kurt Vonnegut in Taipei.) In other words, the cultural differences that readers here find intriguing may be found not so much horizontally—across the Pacific Ocean—but in the verticality of social strata and its diversity.

My work is different for a second reason: while my novel *The Only Game in Town*, an East-West spoof, also draws on my Chinese-American background, my other four novels could have been written by anyone, say, a Diana Smith. It has perplexed and bothered me that this has breached, in some eyes, prescriptions I was unaware of at first.

As David Henry Hwang put it—and I remember what he said almost word for word: In this country today, only blacks can write about blacks, only women about women, only Asian Americans about Asian Americans, but white males can write about anyone.

An interesting observation from him, and he has many. I'm happy that David has written about the sexual ambivalence of a French diplomat in his remarkable play, *M. Butterfly*, now also a film, and that Kazuo Ishiguro, whose background is Japanese and who lives in London, explored in his brilliant novel, *The Remains of the Day*, the life, misapprehensions and inhibitions of an elderly English butler—in the first person.

Supposing they had restricted themselves to Asian American themes and characters . . . what a loss it would have been. We all live in the world, an increasingly global village. Why not write about others? Why should anyone disfranchise him or herself from any human history or experience? Is anything human alien?

—Leo Hamalian, "A MELUS Interview: Diana Chang," *MELUS* 20, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 39–40

B I B L I O G R A P H Y

- The Frontiers of Love*. 1956.
A Woman of Thirty. 1959.
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Edith Maude Eaton

1865–1914

Winnifred Eaton

1875–1954

MOST SCHOLARS consider Edith Maude Eaton and Winnifred Eaton the first Chinese-American women writers. Their Chinese mother, Grace (Lotus Blossom) Trefusis, was educated in England by missionaries and then returned to China, where she met Edward Eaton, an English silk merchant. They married, eventually moved to Montreal, Canada, and had 14 children. Neither Edith nor Winnifred looked particularly Asian, but they grew up poor and regularly confronted class and racial discrimination—a subject both women would later explore in their writings. However, their paths to literary success took dramatically different courses.

Edith Eaton was born in England, but, because British society frowned upon her parents' interracial marriage, the family emigrated when she was six to Montreal, where, unhappily, tolerance was not much greater. The prejudice Edith experienced in both countries greatly influenced her writing career. She embraced and defended her heritage, writing mostly about Chinese- and Asian-American topics under the pen name Sui Sin Far (also Sui Sin Fah or Sui Seen Far). Articles and short stories published in several Montreal newspapers and magazines launched her career in Canada. After she moved to the United States in 1898, where she lived in various West Coast Chinatowns (principally in Seattle and San Francisco), her work began to appear in American magazines. She is perhaps best known for the autobiographical essay "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian," which details the social alienation and suffering she experienced as a biracial woman. Edith Eaton never married and, at the age of 49, died of heart disease, soon after publishing her only book-length work, *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*.

Winnifred Eaton also left Canada as a young adult, first to Jamaica for a brief stint as a newspaper reporter, and then to Chicago, where she worked as a typist while completing her first novel, *Miss Numè of Japan*. Quite in contrast to her sister, Winnifred Eaton appropriated a Japanese persona and began using the Japanese-sounding pseudonym

Onoto Watanna—perhaps to distinguish herself from her sister, or possibly to play on America's sentimentality at the time toward the Japanese. In fact, period photographs show her wearing a kimono, hair piled atop her head in traditional Japanese style. Later, in New York City, she met and married Bertrand W. Babcock, with whom she had four children. The marriage was strained by his alcoholism, however, and they eventually divorced; she later returned to her native Canada with her second husband, Francis Fournier Reeve. With her various marriages and pseudonyms, the record of her life and work appears under many names; in addition to those mentioned, she is also known as Winnifred Eaton Reeve, Winnifred Babcock, and Winnifred Babcock Reeve.

Primarily writing formulaic romance novels that pair a Japanese or Eurasian woman with an English or American man, Winnifred Reeve paid such close attention to Japanese cultural and linguistic idiosyncrasies that she fooled fans and critics alike. She also wrote a novel with an Irish-American protagonist (written under the name Winnifred Mooney) and several regional books about cattle ranching set in Canada. Though they were relatively well received, she achieved her great popular and financial success publishing the best-selling melodramas with predictable, sentimental outcomes for their Japanese heroines. From 1925 to 1932, she wrote and edited film scripts in Hollywood, many of them adaptations of her own novels, but, regrettably, she was not credited in most of them. She died, likely of natural causes, on April 8, 1954.

C R I T I C A L E X T R A C T S

THE NEW YORK TIMES REVIEW OF BOOKS

Miss (Edith Maude) Eaton has struck a new note in American fiction. She has not struck it very surely, or with surpassing skill. But it has taken courage to strike it at all, and, to some extent, she atones for lack of artistic skill with the unusual knowledge she undoubtedly has of her theme. The thing she has tried to do is to portray for readers of the white race the lives, feelings, sentiments of the Americanized Chinese of the Pacific Coast, or those who have intermarried with them and of the children who have sprung from such unions. It is a task whose adequate doing would require well-nigh superhuman insight and the subtlest of methods. In some of the stories she seems not even to have