Assimilating Asians

Gendered Strategies of Authorship in Asian America

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appear on the last printed page of this book.

FOR HELEN YU-LI CHAO CHU

AND WEN DJANG CHU

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Assimilating Asians

Introduction
"A City of Words"

"Don't tell anyone you had an aunt. Your father does not want to hear her name. She has never been born." I have believed that sex was unspeakable and words so strong and fathers so frail that "aunt" would do my father mysterious harm. . . . But there is more to this silence: they want me to participate in her punishment. And I have.

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. . . . The real punishment was not the raid swiftly inflicted by the villagers, but the family's deliberately forgetting her.

My aunt haunts me—her ghost drawn to me because now, after fifty years of neglect, I alone devote pages of paper to her.—Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*

This is a city of words.

We live here. In the street the shouting is in a language we hardly know. The strangest chorale. We pass by the throngs of mongers, carefully nodding and heeding the signs. Everyone sounds angry and theatrical. Completely out of time. They want you to buy something, or hawk what you have, or else shove off. The constant cry is that you belong here, or you make yourself belong, or you must go.—Chang-rae Lee, *Native Speaker*

Lelia gives each one a sticker. She uses the class list to write their names inside the sunburst-shaped badge. Everybody, she says, has been a good citizen. She will say the name, quickly write on the sticker, and then have me press it to each of their chests as they leave. . . . Now, she calls out each one as best as she can, taking care of every last pitch and accent, and I hear her speaking a dozen lovely and native languages, calling all the difficult names of who we are.—Chang-rae Lee, *Native Speaker*

In Maxine Hong Kingston's family memoirs, *The Woman Warrior* (1975) and *China Men* (1977), Chinese American culture is introduced as a complex legacy of family secrets, a repressed history that haunts the American-born narrator.[1] Although the first volume seems to suggest that the narrator's primary quarrels are with her parents and community, whose methods of socializing her seem too Chinese and out of step with the family's life in America, the grimness of that life is gradually revealed to be rooted in the Asian American past in America, the invisibility of that past to mainstream Americans, and its consequent resistance to narration. When Maxine Hong Kingston broke the silence that had been punishing her aunt in 1975, she shocked American readers into recognizing Chinese Americans as complex subjects, subtly changing the cultural landscape for those to follow, but many of her readers did not immediately understand that hers was an American story.

The Woman Warrior is structured around the narrator-protagonist's struggle to overcome the injunction "don't tell," a warning voiced by her mother but also communicated indirectly by the mainstream American society surrounding her beleaguered ethnic community. (That society assigns young Maxine a "zero" IQ because she does not speak English when she enters school; its immigration officials reflexively reckon Maxine's parents, a classical Chinese scholar and a trained midwife-doctor, as illiterate.) When Kingston as author takes up the charge of telling the mother's stories and imagining the untold story behind her father's cursing in the laundry, she writes of a struggle both specific to her family and community and deeply American—a struggle in which speech and authorship are both symbolic of and instrumental to survival and the search for fullness of being.

Twenty years later, Chang-rae Lee's novel *Native Speaker* (1995) uses the story of a Korean American councilman's political aspirations as a metaphor for the political and cultural status of Asian Americans.[2] It asks whether a Korean immigrant, however diligent, charismatic, and gifted, would be permitted to represent the polyglot city of New York as its mayor. In the presumptuous rise and foreordained fall of the immigrant politician John Kwang, the narrator, Henry Park, witnesses the bitter realization of his own dreams of full membership in the nation, dreams that he, as a second-generation Korean American, has never dared to entertain. In the wake of Kwang's spectacular ruin, Henry's image of America as "a city of words" combines his profound sense of estrangement from its promise with his understanding of the nation as a product of cultural struggle, dire yet beautiful. In this marketplace chorale, the participants' very competition creates an unbidden harmony; the nation, like a novel, is built of competing voices. The metaphor of membership based on voice underwrites the

buying and selling; indeed, this novel depicts the public buying and selling of one's voice and ideas as the basis for American subjectivity. Moreover, it interpellates readers into this same struggle. The shimmering unclarity of the pronouns *we, they,* and *you* links readers at first with Henry, regarding the street with posttraumatic caution, and then with a generic observer who moves cautiously, nodding to mask incomplete comprehension and perhaps intimidation. As readers, we cannot know whether Henry's "we" situates him—and us—among immigrants dazed by the cadences of a struggle conducted in English or Americans startled by the immigrants' transformation of their marketplace, for as a second-generation Korean American Henry belongs to both groups and neither. All that is clear is that as readers we share his outsider position by the end of the passage: "You belong here, or you make yourself belong, or you must go." If you don't already belong, you must make yourself belong, and to do that you must remake your self or go.

In a symbolic reconciliation of the drastic social contradictions his tale has exposed, Henry ends his story with the image of himself and his white wife Lelia, a substitute teacher of English as a foreign language, enacting her pupils' Americanization at the end of a school day.[3] Naming and labeling each in his or her own tongue, she hails each as "a good citizen" and sends him or her out into the city with a naming sticker, affirmative of citizenship and subjectivity.[4] Addressing us readers privately, the narrator calls their languages "lovely and native," asserting the Americanness of non-English speakers, but this Americanness is implicitly contingent on their learning English. The novel thus symbolically reaffirms the beliefs that it elsewhere denies—that these pupils of English will one day be assimilated subjects. Yet only Lelia is empowered to recognize the children and speak all their languages, while Henry, her husband, is merely her assistant. In the end, Lelia becomes the person who calls the names; Henry, newly silenced by the mob's rejection of Kwang, joins the "we" who can only be called.

To belong in the city of words, Asian American writers must call for themselves "the difficult names of who we are," must make a place in the American national literature where their stories belong. Because culture—specifically the bildungsroman—is a site for imaginatively transforming readers and protagonists into national subjects by erasing or containing their particular differences, Asian American literature reinscribes those differences in an alternative version of the genre, one in which authorship signifies not only the capacity to speak but the belief that speech—or literary representation—is also a claiming of political and social agency.

Hence, I argue that one of the central ideological tasks accomplished by Asian American literary texts is the construction of Asian American subjects through the transformation of existing narratives about American

identity. To accomplish these fundamental tasks, Asian American writers have had to address the dislocations particular to Asian immigration, the average American's unawareness of Asian American history and culture, and the deeply entrenched presumption that Asian Americans are not American. Because these factors affect Asian Americans both materially and in their cultural production, they have also entered the literature thematically. The urgency with which these writers insist on their communities' Americanness is underscored by their repeated invocation of the trope of survival, a trope that transcends particular historical moments and links concerns about the communities' interdependent needs for material, cultural, and spiritual survival. Hence, this literature both foregrounds and seeks to resolve the contradictions of being Asian American in a country that has historically construed the terms *Asian* and *American* as mutually exclusive.

Using literary texts by Asian Americans, I discuss how Asian American plots of subject formation struggle to address the historical contradiction between a democratic rhetoric of inclusion and the realities of exclusion, discrimination, internment, and cultural marginalization. In contesting, subverting, and complicating the predominant models for assimilation (the ethnicity paradigms), Asian American texts do two complementary kinds of ideological work: they claim Americanness for Asian American subjects, and they construct accounts of Asian ethnicity that complicate, even as they support, the primary claim of Americanness by representing Asian Americans as grounded in highly specific ethnic histories in America. While these tasks may well resemble those undertaken in other American texts, I analyze the ways in which this literary tradition engages with a past particular to Asians in America, including the cultural history of orientalism, the legislative history of exclusion, and the internment of Japanese Americans.

In addition, I offer the first extended literary study of the *gendering* of Asian American narratives of assimilation. In my analysis, historical restrictions on Asian women's immigration and the formation of Asian American families, as well as differences in cultural representations of Asian men and women, combine to explain why Asian American subjects of opposite genders position themselves differently, and generate different narratives of self-formation, in addressing the work of assimilation. Though the era of anti-Asian exclusion acts appears to be over, cultural representations of Asian Americans continue to mark them as racialized subjects in ways that are heavily gendered, and Asian American self-representations are accordingly strongly shaped by gender and race.

Most importantly, I will argue that Asian American men and women of letters enter into an American literary tradition in which male and female authorship, heroism, and agency are figured very differently. Thus, when

Asian American male authors see Americanness as contingent on Asian American males' separation from Asian cultures and family responsibilities (embodied by women), and when they use figures of oedipal strife, paternity, and sexual competitiveness to represent their struggles for authorship, they are constructing an explicitly masculinized model of Asian American subjectivity based on established models in American letters. For Asian American women, the culturally assigned roles of materially preserving the family and upholding traditional ways pose multiple problems in their efforts to claim authorship, Americanness, and agency by deploying the same individualist discourses. Among Asian American women, not only do many face the "second shift" of domestic care and labor from dawn to past dusk —and would-be writers typically begin with less of the intellectual capital (material support, freedom from family responsibilities, education, and intellectual fellowship) described by Virginia Woolf as "a room of one's own"—but many women bear the additional psychological burden of being conditioned from an early age to see their ideas and experiences as unfit for narration or unworthy of publication—due not only to class and race but also to gender.[5] In addition, these women writers must respond to stereotypical mainstream representations of Asian women as one-dimensional beings, sexualized racial others whose function is to lend spice to other, more "representative" characters' narratives—when they are not excluded entirely. Such conventions, understood in conjunction with the positioning of women as symbols of landscape, society, and nation rather than active subjects, form a problematic framework for narrating and perceiving Asian American women as subjects, much less exemplary American subjects, in their own right. When women writers turn to the richly evocative, well-developed tradition of the female Anglo-American bildungsroman for alternative narrative models, they encounter a tradition, strongly established in the nineteenth century, of defining women's development in terms of their sexual success or failure. Such a tradition, although contested by many modern writers, including those I will discuss, defines yet another ideologically charged norm that problematizes female attempts to imagine autonomous striving and heroism in female terms. As a result, Asian American women writers cannot readily dramatize their own or their characters' Americanness by mimicking male constructions of Asian American subjects as outlaws, rebellious sons, or founding literary fathers; they are bound to challenge those narrative norms. In symbolically contesting their multiple marginalization from a literature defining American identity, Asian American women writers must develop a more varied and arguably more complex range of narrative strategies than their brothers require. This variety has led to their work being attacked and misunderstood by both white and Asian American readers.

By suggesting that it is both necessary and appropriate for men and women to adopt differing rhetorical strategies in the struggle for survival and acculturation, even in the second and third generations, I hope to illuminate the Asian American gender gap. This gap is most dramatically illustrated in the tensions between the Chinese American writers Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston, and it is implicitly based on the premise that there ought to be a single common narrative of a community's experience, a premise I contest. Kingston remarked twenty years ago that the men's and women's stories in her narrative universe did not go together but that she hoped they someday would. This study explores why that day has been so long in coming and suggests that Asian American narratives of assimilation may transcend gender only when its influence on individual subjects is better understood.

Finally, I emphasize that these are *literary* texts by analyzing them as bildungsromane, novels of subject formation. Viewing the Anglo-American bildungsroman as a genre that depicts and privileges certain subjects as exemplary of the nation, I examine how Asian Americans rewrite the genre to register their vexed and unstable positions in America. In place of traditional narratives of the subject's successful socialization, Asian Americans stage what Christine So has called "an eternal moment of potential assimilation."[6] The present participle of my title, *Assimilating Asians,* marks the centrality of assimilation as a tantalizing but unattainable goal in this literature. With the Asian American re-vision of the bildungsroman as a focal point, I argue that the historical barriers to entry, settlement, and citizenship faced by Asian immigrants help to explain how material concerns about founding and continuing a family in America are transformed in the Asian American imagination into a literature about authorship and genealogy. Finding themselves without a clear place in American society, these writers have made the struggle for authorship, and for the founding of a new literary tradition, central tropes for the more fundamental tasks of claiming and constructing Asian American subjectivity.

My argument presents Asian American subjectivity as a dialectic between two mutually constitutive aspects of ethnicity, the Asian and the American. Mine is not the "dual personality" model in which the Asian American subject is rendered neurotic by the incommensurability of his Asian and American halves.[7] Rather, I see these two aspects of an Asian American's culture and identity as organically connected but requiring different rhetorical gestures. To be Asian *American,* one claims Americanness but reshapes conventional narratives of American subject formation; given national narratives that position Asian Americans as ethnic, racialized outsiders in America, Asian American authors respond by imaginatively inhabiting and transforming such stories. Hence, I argue that Asian American subjectivities in these texts are characterized by the emergence of a critical ethnic intelligence that deploys and interrogates traditional narratives of Americanization. In this literature, I argue, one proves one's Americanness by showing one's ability to question the idea of America, thereby fundamentally altering that idea for everyone else. As *Asian* Americans, these authors also construct representations of Asian ethnicity that are useful for their lives in America, sometimes by scrutinizing and rewriting accounts of Asian ethnicities received from Asian or American sources. These two gestures are examined in the two parts of this study, which focus on the making of Americanization narratives and the texts in which American-born authors redefine a particular Asian culture (Chinese) as a component of Asian American identity.[8] Taken together, the two parts should illustrate that the narrative constructions of American selves and ethnic cultures are organically joined in the project of creating a literature that is both American and transformative of established, implicitly Anglo-American norms.

The Immigrant Analogy

In using literary texts to consider Asian American assimilation, I am claiming both that Asian American differs from European American assimilation and that we can understand this difference by reading literary texts. Therefore, before continuing with my literary claims, I need to contextualize my use of the term *assimilation,* especially in relation to the existing sociological literature. To speak of assimilation or ethnicity is to use terminology marked by several generations of sociological studies modeled on "ethnicity paradigms" for race, paradigms based on the study of European immigrants' entry into and adaptations to American society. Led by Robert E. Park and his colleagues in the influential Chicago school of sociology, ethnicity theorists based their work on an ethnic relations cycle whose stages included contact, competition, conflict, accommodation, and assimilation. Within this theoretical framework, racial conflict, such as that experienced by American blacks in their migration to northern cities in this period, was generally explained as analogous to the experience of European immigrants.[9] This "immigrant analogy," and the ethnicity school's presumptions of progress for all, have been criticized on several counts. First, the model tends to promote complacency about the eventual resolution of deeply rooted racial conflicts. Second, the school's use of the term *assimilation* has been ambiguous and shifting. At times, it has implied an ideal of "Anglo-conformity," which required minority groups to adopt the norms and values of Anglo-Americans without any reciprocal adaptations by the core group; at other times, it has been linked with a mutual "amalgamation" of races and cultures, a social "melting pot" in which both the

core and the minority cultures would be transformed into something new.[10] Finally, ethnicity theorists have been criticized for failing to distinguish between the assimilation processes of white ethnic groups and those of groups singled out for exclusion on the basis of race as early as the 1920s, when Park and Burgess published their founding definitions. As sociologists Michael Omi and Howard K. Winant have noted, ethnicity theory typically assumes rather than proves the similarity between white and nonwhite immigrant experiences through use of the immigrant analogy.[11]

Within this tradition, a useful analysis is that of Milton Gordon, who breaks "assimilation" into seven variables, notably distinguishing cultural assimilation or acculturation (the change of cultural patterns to those of the host society) from structural assimilation (large-scale entrance into institutions of the host society on a primary group level).[12] Gordon made the key point that minority groups could achieve cultural assimilation through their own efforts but that their structural assimilation, being controlled by the core group, might well be delayed indefinitely despite their best efforts.[13] Also helpful was the "cultural pluralism" paradigm set forth by Horace Kallen and others. This model of American society as a federation enriched by the distinct cultures of numerous ethnic groups provided a needed corrective to the Anglo-conformist model (now thought of as the melting pot), which equated successful Americanization with the renunciation of minority cultures. More recently, scholars addressing the persistence of ethnicity have persuasively described ethnic cultures as continually evolving to meet new circumstances.[14]

Despite these useful variants, ethnicity theory fundamentally minimizes the importance of "racial formation" as a significant organizing principle in social relationships. Here I use Omi and Winant's term designating racial categories and meanings as part of an evolving discursive network generated by a society's political struggles, one that has material effects on assigned racialized positions in the struggle (68). This point is evident in contemporary neoconservative arguments that deny the determining power of race-based structural inequities and call for minorities to address their problems at the level of individual responsibility.[15] By linking such "bootstraps" models with neoconservative policies based on the premises that race discrimination does not exist, or does not merit structural remedies, Omi and Winant explain the policy implications of the ethnicity paradigm as well as the reasons why a critique of that paradigm is urgently needed. The recognition of race as a significant basis of both discrimination and identity formation for Asian Americans is particularly important because of public perceptions that Asian Americans are upwardly mobile, not significantly affected by racial discrimination, and indifferent or hostile to other racial minorities—or, worse, that they compete with or help to exploit other racial groups. Such assumptions have long been contested by Asian Americanist scholarship.

In writing this study, I recognize the usefulness of ethnicity theorists' work in defining ideas such as assimilation, yet I also question the immigrant analogy. Although I recognize that Eastern and Southern Europeans, as well as Irish and Jewish immigrants, have also been seen and treated as alien races threatening the Anglo-American core of American society, I insist that American constructions of Asian Americans as inherently alien, unassimilable, and threatening to the core of American culture and identity are rooted in earlier, European constructions of Asians as fundamentally different and inferior. Hence, I use literary evidence to contribute to a growing body of work describing Asian Americans as a group defined by a common racial history. For instance, scholars have documented a long cultural history in which first Europeans, and then white (and sometimes black) Americans, saw Asians as radically different from themselves, a history that goes back to the racial constructions attendant upon European colonization and continues to be influenced by American relationships with the various Asian nations;[16] the history of immigration and other laws directed solely against Asians;[17] bars to citizenship based on the legal construction of Asians as "nonwhite";[18] the internment of the Japanese Americans in World War II (S. Chan, *Asian Americans,* 122–40; Takaki, *Strangers,* 379–405); and the persistent construction of Asian Americans as generic Asian scapegoats for larger social inequities in incidents such as the lightly punished murder of Vincent Chin by white auto workers in 1982 and the Los Angeles riots of 1992.[19] These and many other studies lead me to conclude that Asian Americans of different genders, ethnic groups, and class affiliations have sufficient common experiences and interests to justify the reading of "Asian American literature" as a cohesive body of texts emerging from a common history. Like Omi and Winant, I base my work on the premise that race in the United States is an ideological system of meanings constructed socially, as a function of political struggle, with material effects, but unlike them I do not wish to argue that it is more basic and central than such categories as gender and class; rather, it is a separate category that interacts with these but must not be subsumed within them. For me, culture is a central site for that political struggle.

Assimilating Readers and Writers

The reading, writing, and teaching of novels and other literary texts have a particular function in a liberal arts education, which I see as fulfilling a

double role. On one hand, I believe that a school does function in part as an "ideological state apparatus" (ISA) for instructing citizens in "the ruling ideology" and preparing subjects of all classes to take their respective places in the system, as the Marxist critic Louis Althusser has suggested. In such a system, one's literary education in particular functions to convey both the official culture's accepted values and its sanctioned forms of subjectivity (155). On the other hand, it is also true that education is an essential tool for those who wish to transform a society and that literary education in particular may provide individuals not only with the tools of cultural literacy and expertise in critical thinking but also with access to narratives of others' struggles to survive in, or resist, oppressive public narratives.

My views of liberal education as serving both conservative and transformative ideologies are particularly focused on the teaching, reading, and writing of literature. Cultural critics have described how the study of English was initially intended to promote identification with English national culture among colonial, working-class, and female students, thereby reducing their motivation to demand improved political rights.[20] In the United States, the study of English and American literature, along with instruction in the language itself and democratic values, has long been seen as essential to the socialization of both immigrant and American-born subjects. Hence, the American literary canon has come to function as a site for debate about the nature and proper boundaries of American identity itself.[21] Since the first step in changing public thinking about these crucial topics must involve the writing of alternative accounts, my story about the writing of Asian American literature as a form of cultural struggle, and the emergence of authorship as a central trope for establishing oneself as an American subject, must be understood as part of a broader struggle for national and personal definition that is shared with other Americans.

In *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form,* Priscilla Wald contrasts "official narratives" about American national identity with personal ones, concluding that "National narratives actually shape personal narratives by delineating the cultural practices through which personhood is defined."[22] Stories of individual subject formation must fit, or at best challenge, recognized forms, which in turn are negotiated in relation to public accounts defining the nation. If, as Wald suggests, the author's narrative of formation is not recognized by others unless it is cast in a form compatible with established discourses (official narratives), the untold, "repressed" stories form the published narratives' unconscious. In poststructuralist theory, a child cannot understand and express himself or herself as a subject except through language.[23] Analogously, the author's capacity to write and publish a narrative of subject formation—that is, to position himself or herself in relation to the "language" of his or her culture's narrative conventions—determines his or her survival as an "author," a subject known through words.

Asian Americans' stories have also been shaped by official discourses, but their relationship to these discourses has been dominated by a double exclusion: while official narratives defined the very character of the nation in terms exclusive of Asians, Asian Americans themselves were also excluded in various ways from participating in public discourses.[24] In this sense, Asian American stories—both literary narratives of individual subject formation and the historical pasts of the various groups that collectively comprise Asian America—are themselves part of that which has been repressed in writing the "official story" of the nation.[25] Hence, in contrast to Wald's procedure of reading the untold stories behind the published narratives of widely studied authors, I generally read the published narratives of less visible authors as the stories untold, until relatively recently, in the "official story" of American literature. By providing paradigms for reading these narratives, I aim to bring into clearer focus the shared meanings and broader significance of this emerging tradition. However, I also suggest that a kind of repression is involved when a member of a marginalized group seeks to claim membership in American society. To describe this process, I borrow the psychanalytic term *abjection,* which has been expanded from its original use to describe the individual psyche and applied to the ideological production of certain groups as pariahs who, as outsiders, define and guarantee the limits of the core.[26] In my readings of Asian American male writers I argue that these writers abject the Asian feminine as a response to their own abjection as racialized others in the eyes of mainstream Americans.

Like Wald, I choose to read Asian American narratives of formation as literary narratives in order to emphasize how authors' choices are shaped by the discursive fields they enter, the audience they hope to reach, and the genres they adopt and adapt. Because literary texts have their own systems of signification, textual readings attentive to such systems can be richer and more revealing—or at least more accurate—than readings that treat artistic works as transparent ethnographic documents.[27] By considering these texts as conscious artistic creations, we can recognize the subjectivities of their authors. We can speak of the texts not only as fictive or biographical life stories but as strategic interventions in American literary constructions of race, ethnicity, and gender. Such an approach underscores the agency of Asian Americans as authors as well as the importance of authorship as the vehicle and trope for agency in this literature. With this in mind, I argue that the literary genre of the bildungsroman is a central site for Asian American re-visions of American subject formation because it has been accorded a place of honor in literary curricula that are, in turn, used to socialize pupils in approved American values. Although I discuss texts from other genres

(memoirs, plays, and short stories), I focus on texts that do the ideological work central to the bildungsroman, which Lowe has helpfully described as a version of assimilation.

The Subjects of Bildung

In *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics,* Lisa Lowe succinctly characterizes the novel as a site for interpellating readers as national subjects. Invoking Benedict Anderson's work on nationalism, she argues that readers of this genre implicitly identify with an "imagined community" of fellow citizens, a community defined by the reading of a shared national literature. In both England and the United States, literary canons serve as sites where individual differences are subsumed within unifying narratives of national identity and material social differences are symbolically reconciled. Within this canon, the bildungsroman is especially prominent, as it is

> the primary form for narrating the development of the individual from youthful innocence to civilized maturity, the telos of which is the reconciliation of the individual with the social order. The novel of formation has a special status among the works selected for a canon, for it elicits the reader's identification with the bildung narrative of ethical formation, itself a narrative of the individual's relinquishing of particularity and difference through identification with an idealized "national" form of subjectivity.[28]

Thus, the traditional bildungsroman socializes readers by inviting them to identify with protagonists as they strive to become good citizens of their nation, a task that requires them to relinquish their "particularity and difference." This formulation both sums up previous accounts of the genre's ideological function and lays bare a function that was always present but generally undiscussed: *assimilating* subjects. It therefore helps clarify why the bildungsroman is a contested site for Asian American authors seeking both to establish their own and their characters' Americanness and to create a narrative tradition that depicts and validates the Asian American experience on its own terms. However, the genre is inevitably transformed in Asian American literature because the Asian American subject's relation to the social order is so different from that of the genre's original European subjects. As I have suggested, Asian Americans have been precluded from identifying simply as "American subjects" by mainstream discourses constructing them as perennial outsiders.

James Hardin, the editor of *Reflection and Action: Essays on the Bildungsroman,* explains that in German the term *bildung* connotes broad, humanistic "cultivation" and "formation" and refers to an individual's development; it is also a collective name for the cultural and spiritual values of a specific people or social stratum in a given historical epoch—and, by extension, the achievement of learning about that same body of knowledge and acceptance of the value system it implies (xi–xii).[29] Thus, the bildungsroman chronicles a youth's "formation" as he or she internalizes his or her society's values. The Marxist critic Georg Lukács defines the genre's central theme as "the reconciliation of the problematic individual driven by deeply-felt ideals with concrete social realities" (qtd. and trans. in Hardin, *Reflection,* xvi–vi). Lukács's definition stresses not only the process of socialization but the historical specificity of the "social realities" depicted in the genre; in this sense, it is typical of criticism linking the genre with the classic realist novel.[30]

Within the (ideological) discourses of liberal humanism, the classic realist text interpellates the reader by inviting him or her to identify with a particular perspective, as described by Catherine Belsey in "Constructing the Subject":

> The reader is invited to perceive and judge the "truth" of the text, the coherent, non-contradictory interpretation of the world as it is perceived by an author whose autonomy is the source and evidence of the truth of the interpretation. This model of intersubjective communication, of shared understanding of a text which represents the world, is the guarantee not only of the truth of the text but of the reader's existence as an autonomous and knowing subject in a world of knowing subjects. In this way classic realism constitutes an ideological practice in addressing itself to readers as subjects, interpellating them in order that they freely accept their subjectivity and their subjection. . . .
>
> By these means classic realism offers the reader a position of knowingness which is also a position of identification with the narrative voice. To the extent that the story first constructs, and then depends for its intelligibility, on a set of assumptions shared between narrator and reader, it confirms both the transcendent knowingness of the reader-as-subject and the "obviousness" of the shared truths in question. (52–53)

The classic text interpellates the reader by soliciting his or her identification with an imagined authority who speaks for the society, a Subject who transcends and subsumes individual differences. Poststructuralist theory tells us that the subject who emerges from participation in shifting, conflicting discourses is not autonomous, unified, or stable yet is ideologically conditioned to compose himself or herself as such: hence, the seductiveness and enduring influence of the classic text, which invites the reader to function as a subject by sharing the perspectives of another, idealized Subject.

However, various critics have described the Subject of realist fiction as a

construct founded on the exclusion (some would say the abjection) of all sorts of particularizing traits and histories. For instance, the realist novel's dialogic conventions have been shown to define the Subject as an educated person, either male or ungendered, without other class, regional, or religious affiliation, through ideological conventions equating standard English with reliable speech and "marked" speech such as slang with less universal and reliable speakers. The realist novel typically places colonies, former colonies, and people of color outside the central action, while creating structures of reference that presume not only their presence but also (white, middle-class) national subjects' right to govern them and consume the wealth they produce off-site. Not only the subjectivities, the labor, and sometimes the bodies of blacks but also those of working-class people are rendered invisible by English culture generally, and certain people, such as working women, may be used as boundary figures to mark the border between privileged and abject people.[31] In short, the realist novel solicits our identification with an implied Subject who is both nominally unmarked by race, gender, and class and defined by the selective exclusion of particularizing traits. By erasing even the operation of excluding its others, this system of reference exaggerates the universality of a perspective that, when returned to its proper framework, defines by a process of exclusion and division.

Of course, neither the author of realist fiction nor his or her surrogate, the narrator, is the only speaker who represents the Subject of fiction. Like the Lacanian babe in the words, the reader of realist fiction must interpellate himself or herself into multiple positions within a single text, aligning himself or herself with characters' as well as narrators' perspectives. As the child's consciousness unifies the multiple positions he or she takes in language, the novel reader's subjectivity unifies the various subject positions emerging from the text.

In a related vein, a central premise of realist fiction is the identification of exemplary characters with a particular kind of interior life—a complex mental and emotional life signified in fiction by the words of an articulate speaker. According to Nancy Armstrong, this verbally constructed "interiority" became identified with the figure of the "domestic woman" in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as part of an ideological shift that conceived of family life as feminized and "private," distinct from a masculinized "public" sphere of economic and political competition. By constructing the domestic woman, the bearer of middle-class virtues, as central to the novel, English fiction settled upon a figure with which a broad range of readers could identify. In theory, anyone could possess fine mental qualities (like the heroines'), whereas few could possess a landed estate with an income of four or five thousand a year (like the aristocratic men whose pride they humbled). Armstrong points to Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (published in 1740), in which an aristocrat's desire for his servant's body is supplanted by erotic interest in her *words,* as a key text in the culture's rethinking of identity: instead of being identified by outward traits (body, gender, class), Pamela is defined by qualities of mind.[32] In Armstrong's account, this represented a challenge to the former English social order, which defined subjects according to exterior class status; in presenting this challenge, the domestic novel played a key part in a general cultural shift that privileged middle-class mental qualities as exemplary. Because women presided over the newly separated domestic sphere, fictional plots concerning women, sexual desire, and marriage were perceived as unrelated to the class competition provoked and sharpened by the upheavals of industrialization; the "rise" of the novel and its central figure, the "domestic woman," who embodied middle-class virtues, solicited the identification of readers with those virtues because they were constructed as transcending the class divisions evident in the economic and political spheres. In both male- and female-centered novels, males eventually had to adopt the same mental qualities—frugality, diligence, Protestantism, postmarital monogamy, honesty, sincerity, modesty, forthrightness, compassion, and articulateness—which became the approved and definitive qualities of the emerging middle class, the novel's target audience. As these figures emerged in the English novel and its American equivalent, the sentimental novel, they came to embody domesticized virtues that were also perceived as definitive of American character in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[33] The Victorian novel's nuclear family would become a model for the middle-class, Protestant, heterosexual, hardworking family that Asian Americans, like so many others, were expected to emulate materially (by submitting to American law and the labor requirements of the economy) and culturally (by internalizing these values and, if they wanted to publish fiction, writing narratives showing that they had internalized these values, this sense of self).

Toward an Asian American Bildungsroman

Though Nancy Armstrong's documentation focuses on England and its class struggles, she and other theorists of the novel aptly describe how the realist novel and its subgenre, the bildungsroman, still shape contemporary bildung plots and codes for defining individual subjectivity as a well as the core Anglo-American values that came to be associated with Americanness.[34] For one thing, Armstrong's virtual renaming of English bildungsroman as the "domestic novel" emphasizes two key points. This genre, unlike that of the epic or historical novel, focused on interiority, voice, thoughts, and emotions, rather than public and heroic acts, as an appro-

priate subject for fiction. For Asian Americans, individual bildung, defined in private and domestic terms, would become the main material for a core body of literature partly because many Asian Americans found this primary level of their experience written out of the mainstream culture. For writers, mastering the genre's rich and subtle range for representing individual experience would provide a way both to establish a character's or narrator's complex interiority and to demonstrate one's mastery of American culture.[35]

Second, the novel partipated in the culture's ideological separation of private and public spheres by representing class conflicts in seemingly apolitical forms as domestic plots. Not only could cross-class marriages symbolize the needed reconciliation of the upper and middle classes in England in a privatized fictional realm, but the emergent class struggles between factory owners and workers, and disagreements between hard-nosed and soft-hearted ideologues about the proper responses to them, were rewritten as gendered, romantic differences in "industrial novels" in which humane heroines tempered hard-edged capitalists.[36] Whereas males were too precisely marked by class, profession, and faction, the domestic novel produced an idealized woman with whom readers could identify and who could therefore become the heart of a broader imagined community—a nation—that subsumed class differences.

For Asian Americans, this separation of spheres and the possibility of coding political conflict in private, domestic, or sentimental terms would be all the more important because Asian Americans write for audiences that generally know little of Asian American histories and do not necessarily share the writers' perspectives on issues of race and nation. Thus, an Asian American's historical novel about Korean, Filipino, or Japanese nationalism, for instance, would have been more difficult to sell to readers who did not share Asian or Asian American frames of reference. (Consider, for instance, the relative invisibility of Vietnamese works about the Vietnam War.)[37] Similarly, Asian American literature about white racism has generally been less successful than literature that omits such themes, about which authors and audience might not share either a consensus or even a comparable base of experience and information.[38] My claim is not that Asian Americans eschew political or historical novels; it is that in writing such novels the authors must either find a frame of reference accessible and acceptable to "mainstream" Americans or accept a smaller audience and continued invisibility; one such frame is the familiar, ostensibly depoliticized narrative of formation. Asian American writers therefore turn to the bildungsroman for a repertoire of representational conventions that purport to transcend such political differences while providing an idiom for addressing them indirectly. This is why, for instance, we see critiques of racism and class exploitation beautifully clothed in rhetorics of liberalism and individual bildung (emphasizing self-knowledge, self-determination, and the desire for truth and justice) in the works of early, activist writers such as Edith Eaton (1865–1914) and Carlos Bulosan (1911?–56), who lived and wrote in periods when anti-Chinese and anti-Filipino racism was widely accepted and unions were seen as un-American.[39]

Adapting Womens' Plots

The presence of a vital tradition of female bildungsroman in English is particularly helpful to me as a critic and, I believe, to these writers.[40] For instance, a female bildungsroman is typically characterized by tension between female development (connected, intersubjective, concerned with mutual nurturance and intimacy) and male paradigms (which emphasize separation, autonomy, and competition). Some women authors have captured this tension between masculine and feminine norms by composing double-voiced narratives that challenged the narrative conventions of unity in various ways such as encoding a socially rebellious plot within a conventional surface narrative, invoking but revising traditional myths or fairy tales, or linking a plot of development with a plot that unravels it. Other strategies include emphasizing women's development in conjunction with other women or conceiving a "collective protagonist" whose identity is wrapped up with others, to communicate the perception that women define their selves more relationally than men; and recognizing that women's conflicts, while not absolutely different from men's, may be more relentless. Thus, female protagonists may pay a higher price for reconciling tensions between inner concentration and external socialization, sexual expression and restraint, or madness and normality.

Both in women's narratives and in the criticism describing them, the sense of grappling with norms for self-formation that are unsuitable or inimical to one's own possibilities and aims forms a crucial model for my own readings, which pit Asian American values and selfhood (typically conveying greater concern with community and family) against the individualist norms that, as we have seen, are presumed to define human, American, and universal experience, while (as critics argue) they in fact frame the novel in a white, male, Western perspective. On the other hand, a division also exists between the genders in Asian American narrative. As suggested earlier, the men internalize and adapt existing paradigms centering on male subjectivity, including a male tradition that specifically rejects the "domestic" novel and its feminized values, while the women adopt strategies shared by women writers of other races. Yet, writers of both sexes use strategies found in women's writing, no doubt because these are basic strategies for

challenging or decentering the Anglo-American presence in the genre. For instance, my reading of Carlos' Bulosan's autobiographical novel is based on the premise of two plots, one a "conventional" plot of development and one a "rebellious" indictment of racism. The invocation and subversion of traditional plots and myths is central to the work of Edith Maude Eaton, Bharati Mukherjee, and Maxine Hong Kingston; and the sense of assimilation as a process that unravels as it seems to progress underlies numerous texts, including those of Chang-rae Lee, John Okada, and Mukherjee.

The tension between individualism and an intersubjective sense of self, which is arguably the central tension of female bildungsroman, is present for all the Asian American writers I discuss. Despite their different ethnicities (Korean, Filipino, Japanese, Chinese, and Indian American), the tension in these works comes from the Asian sense of the self as rooted in family and community and the American sense of the self as an autonomous being, free to move from place to place.[41] As we have seen, feminist critics perceive the same distinction as a gender difference within Anglo-American bildungsroman, with the result that the genre itself is a form for examining (and symbolically reconciling) this tension within women's texts. Part of assimilation, for Asian American writers, is the invention of a bildungsroman that describes a subject who combines independence, mobility and outspokenness with a deep sense of affinity with familial and communal others; as a group, these texts work to affirm that both halves of this equation are American and both are Asian.[42] While others have focused on plots of second-generation separation and independence, however, my study questions the Asian American recasting of marriage plots.

The Missing Plot

Because marriage plots are central to gender construction in traditional bildungsromane, their absence or transformation in Asian American narratives may also be read as the authors' rethinking of gender roles in light of the group's vexed relationships with national identity.[43] In particular, Asian American texts tend to avoid the utopian "well-married hero" plot, in which the male or female subject's moral and social progress is figured in terms of romantic choices that culminate in marriage. In America, marriage is a key site for representing the immigrant's Americanization, "emblematic of the promise of America to replace descent with consent relationships" (Wald, *Constituting*, 279, 348–49, n. 63; Sollors, *Ethnicity*). Implicit in such plots is the use of marriage to signify the individual's reconciliation with the social order. Such marriages, placed at the ends of novels, imply the completion of the protagonist's moral education; in Lowe's terms, which are indebted to Louis Althusser, these marriages signify the successful interpellation of the subject into the nation-state.

Marriage, however, has historically been a site where American legislators and cultural discourses have sought to inscribe the rejection of Asian immigrants as potential citizens. Exclusion-era laws distorted and pressured Asian American family structures by preventing many Asian women from following their countrymen into the United States, miscegenation laws outlawed interracial matches in many states, and cultural representations from that time to the present have signaled hostility to Asians in their problematic representations of Asian-white romantic liaisons. Hence, the conventional, ostensibly race-blind courtship plots that often drove Anglo-American bildungsromane do not obviously fit the real or imagined processes of Asian American subject formation. What, then, replaces marriage as the telos for bildung in this literature? As we shall see, Asian American writers join other Americans in avoiding and criticizing the well-married hero plot, but their alienation from this plot is sharpened by mainstream constructions of them as aliens: their critique is cast in racial terms. Within the codes of the bildungsroman, Asian American protagonists generally can't appear as well-married heroes because marriage would signify their successful integration into the nation, a full assimilation that has not yet occurred either in fact or in the symbolic realm of mainstream culture. Hence, other narratives take the place of the well-married hero paradigm: the "immigrant romance," which recounts the protagonist's search for a white partner to Americanize him or her; the abjection of the Asian mother; the construction of Asian Americans as artist-sons engaged in oedipal struggles; and the figuring of Asian American women as sentimental heroines, brave immigrant foremothers, devoted daughters, and postmodernist authors. In substituting authorship for marriage as a central trope for representing Asian American subject formation, these authors remake the bildungsroman to fit the stories they have to tell.

Myths of Americanization

Given the importance of courtship plots in the bildungsroman, it is not surprising that American ethnic texts sometimes use interethnic or interracial romances to depict the assimilation of ethnic or racial "others" into American society, as ethnicity scholars Werner Sollors and Mary Dearborn have noted.[44] For Asian American authors, interracial romance plots also function as sites for negotiating the formation of ethnic American identities, but the dystopian outcomes that tend to dominate interracial love in this literature suggest fundamental skepticism about the Asian American

subject's possibilities for assimilation, skepticism that seems rooted in the historic positioning of Asian Americans as racially marked outsiders. My study, therefore, uses interracial plots in Asian American texts to discuss their interarticulation of race and gender in defining Asian American subjects. Whereas men and women writers both depict interracial romance and its implicit promise of Americanization as deeply problematic, distinctly gendered versions of these narratives emerge, suggesting strongly gendered differences in the complex process of Asian American subject formation.

In addition to appearing as symbols of the American landscape and potential trophies of successful assimilation, white women serve as cultural mediators, instructors, gatekeepers, and sometime adversaries in Asian male immigrants' tales of Americanization. The rhetorical functions of white women and the construction of the immigrant romance form the basis of my examination of the works of early immigrant authors Younghill Kang (1903–72, Korean American) and Carlos Bulosan (1911?–56, Filipino American). The functions served by white women in these texts must be understood in light of the close connections Kang and Bulosan make between authorship, Americanness, and masculinity.

By contrast, Asian women in the men's texts are used to represent aspects of the authors' homeland or ancestral culture that are abjected from the male protagonists, the better to establish their Americanness. By attributing these traits to Asian women and dissociating them from the protagonists, such texts implicitly construct Asian American subjectivity as masculine. Such constructions, which I locate both in Bulosan's work and in the novels of John Okada (1923–71, Japanese American) and Milton Murayama (1923– , Japanese American), are continued in the works of other male authors and ultimately are contested by Asian American women.

Next I consider the implications of Asian American men's marginalization in the works of contemporary writers Frank Chin (1940– , Chinese American) and David Mura (1952– , Japanese American). Both claim Americanness by casting themselves as author-heroes in an implicitly male narrative, one that defines their American character in terms of authorial integrity, oedipal rebellion, and the founding (or "fathering") of a literary tradition. Because both Chin and Mura purport to speak not only for themselves but for their ethnic communities, their masculinization of the key trope of authorship raises serious questions about the position of women as Asian American subjects and authors in an emerging canon, one in which five of these authors—Bulosan, Okada, Murayama, Chin, and Mura—have arguably attained a significant, anchoring presence.

Inevitably, Asian American women have written back. Two writers, in particular, both challenge and revise male narratives and generate counternarratives, refiguring American authorship, family formation, and self-

construction in feminist terms. Working against the grain of both white and male immigrant representations of Asian women was a necessity for Edith Maude Eaton, who published under the pseudonym Sui Sin Far (1865–1914, Chinese Eurasian), one of the first Asian American women writers. To situate her work, I draw upon the early-twentieth-century poetry of male Cantonese immigrants (edited and translated by Marlon K. Hom from collections published in 1911 and 1915) to show how these "bachelors," physically isolated from their female relatives in China and required by American society to both Americanize (adapt) and remain Chinese (remain socially and economically segregated), respond by projecting this social contradiction symbolically onto their representations of Chinese women. The need to challenge and revise this discursive practice is evident in Eaton's short stories, which describe the immigrant romance from a feminist perspective, and her autobiographical essay, which claims authorship, Americanness, and ethnicity for Asian American women by reconceiving authorship as an expression of filial devotion, an act of cultural mediation, and an assertion of Asian American female subjectivity.[45]

In *Jasmine,* Bharati Mukherjee (1940– , Indian American) also revises the interracial immigrant romance from the Asian woman's point of view, illustrating why women's assimilation narratives differ from men's. Here, the immigrant woman's Americanization is accomplished with the help of white romantic partners, but in order to win their support the woman must submit to their alienating and sanitizing preconceptions of her, thereby renouncing the very past that renders her unique. Because the novel's apparent celebration of this kind of assimilation is grounded in allusions to the English bildungsroman, it illustrates the hazards of adapting the genre as a model for inscribing Asian American female subjectivities.

For both Eaton and Mukherjee, the bildungsroman's celebration of the virtuous "domestic woman" provides useful narrative models for resisting marginalization by creating accessible, sympathetic images of Asian immigrant women as assimilable Americans. However, neither author entirely escapes the genre's tendency to equate feminist consciousness and agency with first world women and fatalist or passive positions with third world women. It remains, then, for other writers to reconstitute Asian female subjectivity as a positive term in its own right rather than the negative half of the Asian American subject.

Chinese American Ethnicities

Following my description of the narrative constitution of Asian Americans as American subjects, I examine how specific texts challenge and complicate that model of subjectivity. In doing so, I focus on the Asian American

preoccupation with reconstructing an Asian American past as a response to Asians' historical exclusion and cultural marginalization from the American mainstream. For such writers, the Asian American past becomes a term that works in various ways to mediate or complicate the task of assimilation. At the same time, the very different pasts being constituted by these writers undermine the conventional notion of Asian America as a single coherent subject. Not only are these pasts divided by differences in nations of origin, but within ethnic groups further distinctions arise as a result of class, region, period and circumstances of immigration, and the authors' ideological agendas. To explore one aspect of this diversity, I turn to three Chinese Americans and their various representations of "China." Focusing on Amy Tan (1952–), Frank Chin (1940–), and Maxine Hong Kingston (1940–), I argue that each author reconstructs *China* and *Chinese ethnicity* as terms that mediate his or her exploration of the problem of assimilation. In this sense, the imagined ancestral past serves rhetorical functions similar to those served by the women examined earlier.

Amy Tan uses Chinese immigrant mothers and modern China as a fictional backdrop to construct Chinese ethnicity in *The Joy Luck Club,* a novel whose multiple narratives construct both mothers and daughters as Asian American subjects. From the mothers' perspective, Tan rewrites the immigrant romance, in which white Americans represent America, by making the immigrant women's *daughters* the primary focus of their desires. In her mother-daughter romance, Chinese American daughters represent America and Americanization for their mothers. From the daughters' perspective, Tan's immigrant mothers serve a range of rhetorical functions whose apparently contradictory nature complexly registers and negotiates the range of contemporary American attitudes toward China. For Tan, as for other Asian American authors, the Chinese mother-woman embodies aspects of Asian ethnicity that she seeks to incorporate into a larger narrative of Asian American identity. The novel's Chinese mothers are presented as mythic, essentialized forces of nature; as witnesses and victims of a backward, oppressive, ahistorical culture; as feminist tricksters and critics of American orientalism; and as the empowering sources for Asian American feminist consciousness. The variety of these mother-daughter positionings conveys the contradictory mainstream attitudes that Chinese American daughters must negotiate in their personal rites of Asian American subject formation, but ultimately, I argue, this text demonstrates Tan's deft internalization of these shifting and evolving attitudes rather than a radical revision.

To locate such a revision, I turn to the longstanding debate between Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston about the appropriate use and meaning of Chinese classics in defining Chinese American culture and subjectivity. For both authors, the Chinese "heroic tradition" fills a symbolic void; each reconstitutes this tradition to stand for an idealized Chinese American masculinity that is otherwise absent from American culture. By mapping the numerous ways in which Kingston's novel brings the heroic tradition into Chinese American culture and engages with her critics, while also reconceiving the very ideas of tradition and authorship, I emphasize both the importance of gender in explaining the authors' differences, and the fluid and instrumental nature of "Chinese" culture in the Chinese American context.[46]

With varying degrees of success, Tan, Chin, and Kingston construct *Chinese ethnicity* as a positive term that mediates their portrayals of Chinese American bildung. Tan's reinvention of the immigrant romance as a mother-daughter romance illustrates the various, conflicting, American perceptions of China and Chinese women that mark her moment of composition and publication. Finally, the Chin-Kingston debate about the Chinese classics demonstrates the evolution of Chinese American cultural nationalism, just as Kingston's brilliant literary performance legitimates her creative manipulations of Chinese texts to celebrate and question, but not to lament, the fluid and evolving culture of Chinese America.