BEYOND LITERARY CHINATOWN

JEFFREY F. L. PARTRIDGE

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A McLellan Book

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Beyond Literary Chinatown
Jeffrey F. L. Partridge

IN MEMORY OF CHERYL B. PARTRIDGE 1938–2006

THE GREATEST TEACHERS LIVE ON IN THEIR PUPILS.

Preface

Literary Chinatown is an imagined community, not in Benedict Anderson's sense, but in Edward Said's Orientalist sense: it is a community imagined by others—for their own purposes and their own pleasures. All ethnic American writers must write either with or against the grain of a ghettoizing principle, but for the Chinese American writer this ghetto has a distinctly exotic flavor that sells well if entertained and embellished, but sells poorly if contradicted. For the Chinese American writer who wishes to move beyond the horizon of literary Chinatown, the expectations of readers and publishers are a distinct hindrance.

Beyond Literary Chinatown is a reception study of Chinese American literature that seeks to engage a historically grounded close reading of contemporary Chinese American literature with current formations of race and ethnicity in America. In particular, the book examines the dynamic relationship between reader expectations of Chinese American literature and the challenges posed by recent Chinese American texts to the assumptions of readers, challenges that push our understanding of multicultural society to new horizons—what I am describing as the emergence of the polycultural.[1]

The horizon metaphor has been used by reception theorists since Hans Robert Jauss to explain the ways readers respond to texts. Readers approach a text with various expectations and assumptions, and as the story unfolds, the text will often challenge and modify those expectations. Readers therefore bring a "reading horizon" to a piece of fiction or a poem. But, as I argue in this book, it is also true that writers often take into account the horizons of readers—and especially so with ethnic literature, or what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari would call a "minor literature." Writers, in this sense, *read*

the reader's horizon. Evidence of the writer's expectations of the reader can be found in the text she or he produces. Thus, the multiple meanings of the horizon metaphor reflect the complex processes at play at the nexus of reader, author, and text.

I imagine three reading communities for this book: reception theorists, Asian Americanists, and scholars of race and ethnicity in America. Asian Americanists will find that my discussion of Chinese American literature and specific readings of texts continue the expansion of Asian American critical studies into an important critical phase marked by books such as *Narrating Nationalisms* by Jinqi Ling, *Edith and Winnifred Eaton* by Dominika Ferens, and *Form and Transformation in Asian American Literature* edited by Zhou Xiaojing and Samina Najmi. This critical phase, as articulated by Zhou in her introduction to *Form and Transformation*, seeks to "explore the impacts of historical forces and various cultural and literary traditions on Asian American writers' appropriations of, negotiations with, and transformations of established literary genres and traditions" (17). My critical readings of specific texts furthermore seek to lift Asian American literature out of the sociocultural realm, where the text is often treated as a "window" into "real" Asian American life, and place it in the aesthetic realm, where formal literary qualities are allowed to speak, and where Asian American writers converse with each other, with American literary tradition, and with their readers (Sue-Im Lee, "Introduction"). Students of reception studies will find an application of the basic premises of Hans Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser, and the early Stanley Fish sustained in a book-length study, as well as an extension, and revision, of Mario J. Valdés's "phenomenological hermeneutics" based on Paul Ricoeur's writing. Chinese American literature provides a fruitful case study for reception theory, but more important to my purposes, reception study provides a useful lens for comprehending the vast changes in Asian American literature in the short span of fifty years. Finally, but equal in importance, this book aims to engage with the ongoing dialogue among scholars of race and ethnicity in America, specifically regarding conversations on the issues of multiculture, polyculture, and the persistence of race.

I want to be upfront about several crucial issues. First, this is not a teleological project—one that situates the emergence of the polycultural and the postmodern sublime as a qualitative advancement in Asian American literature; in other words, one that pits the "enlightened" perspectives of writers like Gish Jen and Li-Young Lee against the "limited" and "naïve" perspectives of Pardee Lowe or Jade Snow Wong. I concur with Jinqi Ling's philosophy in *Narrating Nationalisms*, "The newness of recent Asian American

literary articulations lies not in their inherent power of being contemporary nor in their actual severance from previous sources of resistance, but in their fuller expression, under more enabling (or seemingly more enabling) social conditions, of the possibilities of liberation problematically or incompletely envisioned by earlier Asian American realist and/or nationalist literary voices" (29). In this study, I wish to examine the changing context of textual production and reception as it intersects with developments in America's perception of race and ethnicity from the postwar period to the present.

Second, I do not see polyculturalism as an outright repudiation of multiculturalism, but as the next step after multiculturalism, a critique of its limitations, and a furtherance of its antiracist goals. Vijay Prashad, the theorist who has thus far articulated polyculturalism's agenda, argues vehemently and necessarily against multiculturalism's limitations. In Prashad's view, multiculturalism "tends toward a static view of history" ("Bruce Lee" 54) in a manner that "fetishizes" culture and demands an ethnic subject's allegiance to his or her essential and primordial cultural identity. Prashad is "deeply unhappy with the multicultural neoliberal condescension of our times—where diversity may be something of a fetish to flatten our complexities rather than to allow us space to breathe as political animals" ("Community Scholarship" 118). He urges scholars to "criticize the diversity model of multiculturalism and replace it with the antiracist one of polyculturalism" ("Bruce Lee" 82). Prashad quotes, with approval, Stanley Fish's 1997 critique of the movement as "boutique multiculturalism" and Slavoj Žižek's 1998 critique of multiculturalist diversity as "racism with a distance," and thus joins ranks with these and other scholars in a pointed critique of multiculturalism.[2]

What Prashad and others tend to lose sight of in their opposition to present articulations and manifestations of multiculturalism (from pop culture to academia) is a historical perspective on the multicultural movement and an appreciation for the sacrifices made by scholars, students, and activists in the name of antiracism and minority rights. Timothy B. Powell's critical assessment of Stanley Fish's, Slavoj Žižek's, and Susan Gubar's positions[3] seeks to recuperate this historical context, and he furthermore charges these scholars with uncritically conflating the politically engaged, antiracist multicultural movement with commercialized corporate expressions of multiculturalism and distortions of multiculturalism within academia. He writes, "I think that part of the problem is that, like Fish, many scholars have mistaken 'multiculturalism' as a singular entity (i.e., that 'strong multiculturalism' is really nothing more than 'boutique multiculturalism,' which is little more than Benetton

billboards and ethnic food courts in suburban malls)" (175). Powell sees such critiques of multiculturalism as emanating not from genuine and historical engagement with the various tenets of multiculturalism or the movement's various phases and theorists, but from a postmodern "hermeneutics of suspicion" (155) that automatically reacts against any organizing principle or explanatory model as a Lyotardian "master narrative." Powell calls for critics to "accept the challenge of devising new theoretical paradigms flexible enough to encompass the ways in which these fiercely independent cultures continually come together and come apart in fractal patterns that cannot be fixed in a formulated phrase" (157, echoes of "Prufrock" unacknowledged).

My study of the changing reception of Chinese American literature is an attempt not only to describe changes in Asian American literature, but to describe the emergence of a "new theoretical paradigm" that I believe *is* "flexible enough to encompass" the historical valence of multiculturalism and the cross-fertilizing perspectives of postmodern hybridity theory while remaining cognizant of the persistence of racist and racialized thinking in contemporary American society. A tall order, I know. But I believe that the recent critiques of multiculturalism, however unhistorical and reductivist some may be, point out that multiculturalism as a term has been conflated, and not just in the popular imagination, with primordialism[4] and the fetishization of discrete cultures. Rather than counter this tendency with postmodern concepts like cultural hybridity and pastiche that, *as a replacement* for "multiculturalism," introduce problematic utopian ideals of color-blind societies and unraced subjects (E. San Juan Jr. calls it "the rebarbative postcolonial babble about contingency ruling over all" [371]), I believe we can combine the multicultural with the postmodern in a way that acknowledges the persistence of race. But to do so, we cannot continue to pour the new wine described here into the old wineskins of multiculturalism. In other words, it is not enough to simply explain the ability of multiculturalism to encompass cultural hybridity and racialization. I don't believe it can. The confusion over what multiculturalism stands for is not simply, as Powell would have it, an obfuscation of multiculturalism's laudable aims. It is this, but it is more. Multiculturalism, as critics such as San Juan Jr. have pointed out, is a "politics of difference" that fundamentally depends upon the maintenance of cultural boundaries.[5] Cultural hybridity, on the other hand, describes the porous and fluid nature of identity, and therefore seems inherently at odds with multiculturalism. This basic contradiction makes necessary the invention of new terminology. Polyculturalism, in my estimation, is a term that

combines the power of postmodern identity critique with the strength of multiculturalism's political engagement.

In an insightful review of Prashad's groundbreaking book on polyculturalism, *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity*, Rosebud Elijah asks why "very few scholars and teachers in higher education have thoughtfully used" the emerging critiques of multiculturalism and U.S. racism to develop an "antiracist framework" such as Prashad's polyculturalism. His preliminary answer is that "we are unenthusiastically silent [about multiculturalism's inadequacies] because dismissing multiculturalism may mean unintentionally reinforcing colorblind and/or indigenous theories" (59). This is precisely the problem I have described above: multiculturalism is inadequate on its own because it promotes a view of cultures as monolithic and is, as Prashad frequently reminds us, inherently bound to the skin; postmodern hybridity theory is inadequate on its own because it leads us to another distorted and furthermore politically vacuous view, that race simply doesn't matter, that "we are all human after all" (Elijah 59). Rather, Prashad argues that the recognition of our multiple lineages and linkages are the basis for our combined efforts to acknowledge, resist, and dismantle racism. Prashad writes, "our cultures are linked in more ways than we could catalog, and it is from these linkages that we hope our politics will be energized" (*Everybody* 148). Where I differ with Prashad is in the relationship between polyculturalism and multiculturalism. While I agree that the polycultural is a radical break from multiculturalism, I would like to stress (with Elijah) that polyculturalism, a radical response to racism and multiculturalism's tendency to fetishize culture, evolved from and owes a great debt to multiculturalism, which is also a "response to racism . . . [that] has been useful in providing (limited) access and beginning a conversation about race in this society" (Elijah 59).

In sum, I see polyculturalism as a crucial rhetorical and theoretical maneuver that (1) recovers the political and antiracist impetus of the original multicultural movement from the grips of neoconservative backlash (Omi and Winant 12) and commercial and corporate culture, (2) recognizes the persistent influence of race and racialized thinking in American society (which cannot be elided by replacing the term "race" with "ethnicity" or "culture"), and (3) adopts the energies of postmodern identity theories such as cultural hybridity that destabilize and decenter the fetishizing gaze of popular multiculturalism.

For many readers, the difference between the terms "multiculturalism"

and "polyculturalism" will be slight. There are clear commonalities between multiculturalism and polyculturalism; for instance, broadly understood, both take us beyond the Eurocentrism of the old "melting pot" model. However, I believe the "imagined worlds" of the writers I discuss in this study challenge readers to think about identity in ways that oppose popular notions of multiculturalism. In my analysis of the changing horizon of Chinese American literature, I want both to examine the artistic development of a nonessentializing and fluid view of identity that emerges in the face of American racism and racialization, and to acknowledge a shift from multicultural logic to polycultural logic in ways that illuminate the texts and our understanding of contemporary American literature and society.

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I suppose Asian American literature would not have entered my radar screen if it weren't for English Language Institute and the opportunity it and many supporters gave me to teach in China in 1988 and 1989–90. I doubt that I would have thought beyond *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Woman Warrior* if I hadn't married an amazing woman from Singapore and left U.S. shores to live in that island republic for a decade. And I probably wouldn't have thought twice about the suggestion made by Ban Kah Choon, former Head of English at the National University of Singapore, that I do my Ph.D. dissertation on Asian American literature if it hadn't struck me that my two children were, technically speaking, "Asian Americans." Suddenly, Asian American literature was not just culturally interesting to me—it was deeply personal. As a literary scholar and social critic, I could have a hand, small though it may be, in shaping the world into which my children would grow. It's funny how, looking back, all that seemed haphazard and serendipitous at the time now takes on an aura of divine guidance.

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Contents