CONSTRUCTING AN ASIAN AMERICAN TEXTUAL COALITION

THIS BOOK is a thematic study of Asian American literature. But perhaps even more important, it is a book about the reading of Asian American literature as a critical project within the academy.

Since its inception in the late 1960s, as part of the ethnic studies agenda established by student activism, Asian American literary studies have been gaining increasing institutional recognition across the nation, particularly on the West Coast, and especially since about 1986[1] A number of book-length studies by Asian American critics have appeared or are forthcoming,[2] and recent publishing projects to broaden the canon of American literature have all, to varying extents, included Asian American authors (e.g., Gilbert and Gubar; Elliott et al.; Lauter et al.; Phillips et al.; Reed et al.). Growing academic interest in the subject, even from quarters previously indifferent to it, coincides with a recent explosion of publishing activity by Asian American authors,[3] a phenomenon that has caught the interest of the "mainstream" media (e.g., Feldman; Simpson; Solovitch). In the half decade preceding the writing of this study,[4] there have appeared a large number of first novels, most of them well received;[5] new novels by established writers;[6] several award-winning short story collections;[7] many other interesting additions to Asian American literature;[8] anthologies of Asian American writing, especially by and/or about women;[9] a Broadway hit;[10] and many volumes of poetry, several of which garnered national honors.[11] The year 1991, in particular, is something of an annus mirabilis for Asian American writing; it witnessed the appearance of an extraordinary number of well-received books, some of them debuts for first-timers, others representing new directions for established authors.[12] As this study goes to press in 1992, Asian American literature continues to thrive.[13] In the words of one journalist, the "silence" that once shrouded painful Asian American experiences "has ended in a burst of voices as Asian Americans—long successful in fields such as medicine, engineering and business—are making their mark in the literary world" (Solovitch 1991:18).

The commercial success and general popularity of some Asian American writings, such as Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*, and David

Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*, have raised fundamental questions about how Asian American literature is to be read. Specifically, concern has been voiced about the misreading, appropriation, and co-optation of this literature by white readers and critics.[14] Debate on this matter is part of a larger controversy on the direction of American studies in general and the reading of marginalized literatures in particular. Does the study of a marginalized literature require membership in the given group, participation in appropriately typical historical experience, "insider" cultural knowledge, and a group-specific methodology?

The approach that has come to be known as the "ethnicity school"[15] charges that an affirmative answer to any of the above questions would open the floodgate to a host of ills: exclusivist "biological insiderism" and a " 'good vibes' methodology" (Sollors 1986a:11); an untenable "exceptionalism" (Sollors 1990a:186); as well as further isolation of the marginalized group, fragmentation of American studies as a discipline, a tendency toward "one-sided reading," and perhaps most ominously, undermining of "the possibility of acknowledging an American national culture" (Fox-Genovese 1990:27, 23, 8). Opponents of the "ethnicity school," on the other hand, take issue with its homogenizing invocation of "ethnicity" as a unifying force in American culture, its facile conflation of ethnicity with race, its unwarranted privileging of immigration and assimilation as quintessentially American experiences, its erasure of group-specific historical injuries, and its insensitivity to the distinctive textual features of marginalized literatures. These critics prefer to stress the interacting operations of race, class, and gender in such literatures, attend to their particular sociopolitical contexts, and promote a "text-specific" (Gates 1987:xix) reading methodology which may, however, selectively draw upon universalist literary theories (Wald 1987). A third approach, allied with the "race, class and gender school," advances a "minority discourse" framework that shifts critical focus away from minority-white relations to minority-minority relations. Its premise is that shared historical experiences of oppression have created literary affinities among minorities that cannot be adequately addressed by a model centered on a hegemonic culture (JanMohamed and Lloyd 1990a). This debate on critical methodology, though often couched in terms familiar only to the literature specialist, has far from esoteric implications. The background to its emergence is a rancorous backlash against multiculturalism in education prompted by radical demographic transformations of American society, a backlash that takes forms ranging from attacks on affirmative action to calls for a return to Western classics in college curricula.[16]

To begin to answer the question "How is Asian American literature to be read?" within such a charged context, one must first gain some understanding of the term *Asian American*.

The task is much more difficult than it seems. The term is inherently elastic and of fairly recent currency (the odd title of Lemuel Ignacio's book—see Works Cited—is not a matter of whimsy). It carries within it layers of historical sedimentation. Not merely a denotative label with a fixed, extralinguistic referent, it is a sign, a site of contestation for a multitude of political and cultural forces. It is the semiotic status of the term *Asian American* that shapes our understanding of what kind of discourse Asian American literature is, and in turn, what kind of practice Asian American criticism is.

From a legal perspective, the peoples previously known as Orientals and now designated as Asian Americans have almost all, at one time or another, been excluded from U.S. citizenship. (Recent refugees and immigrants from Southeast Asia in the wake of the Vietnam War constitute an exception.) As Jeff H. Lesser notes in a review of Supreme Court rulings regarding Asians, "Naturalization is the ultimate means whereby a government decides who is acceptable—and who is not" (1985–86: 83): acceptable, that is, as Americans. The Naturalization Act of 1790 passed by Congress employed explicitly racial criteria limiting citizenship to "free white persons"; after this act was successfully challenged on behalf of blacks after the Civil War, "Asian immigrants became the most significant 'other' in terms of citizenship eligibility" (Lesser, 85). In the *Ozawa v. United States* case (1922), the Supreme Court ruled against a Japan-born applicant to naturalization (who had lived most of his life in the United States), arguing that "had these particular races [like the Japanese] been suggested, the language of the act would have been so varied as to include them in its privileges."[17] To circumvent the question of color, the Court defined "white" as "Caucasian." However, when an immigrant from India, Bhagat Singh Thind, attempted to gain citizenship by arguing that he was Caucasian, the Supreme Court changed its definition again, brushing aside anthropological and historical issues and appealing to the popular meaning of the term "white" (S. Chan 1991:94). Furthermore, in its 1923 decision against Thind, the Court invoked the criterion of assimilability to separate the desirable immigrants from the undesirable ones: Asian Indians were distinguished from the swarthy European immigrants, who were deemed "*readily amalgamated*" (italics in original) with the immigrants "already here" (Lesser, 88).

These and other Supreme Court cases prevent Asian Americans from "mov[ing] out of the sphere of 'the other' and into the sphere of 'American' " (Lesser, 94). The legal contortions resorted to in order to maintain exclusion suggest that Asian Americans have historically functioned as a peculiar kind of Other (among other Others) in the symbolic economy of America. Generally speaking, they are, to borrow the subtitle of

James W. Loewen's study of the Mississippi Chinese, "between black and white";[18] however, since Native Americans and Chicanos are also thus placed, the description must be refined. We may say that Asian Americans are put in the niche of the "unassimilable alien": despite being voluntary immigrants like the Europeans (and unlike the enslaved blacks), they are alleged to be self-disqualified from full American membership by materialistic motives, questionable political allegiance, and, above all, outlandish, overripe, "Oriental" cultures. On this last point they are differentiated from the stereotypes of "primitive" or "uncultured" Native Americans, African Americans, and Chicanos. Asian Americans are permanent houseguests in the house of America. When on their best behavior (as defined by the hosts), they are allowed to add the spice of variety to American life and are even held up as a "model minority" to prove the viability of American egalitarian ideals. However, their putative unwillingness or inability to assimilate comes readily to the fore when scapegoating is called for, as recently as in the debate preceding the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (Lesser, 95) and in the English-only movement (Chen and Henderson 1987; Takano 1987).

The Asian American movement of the late 1960s was precipitated by massive demographic changes within Asian American communities caused by the immigration reforms of 1965. Galvanized by anti-Vietnam War activism and modeled upon the Black Power struggle, it represents, among other things, a refusal to acquiesce in the roles and expectations imposed by white society. *Asian American* has since been adopted as the preferred self-designation of the "ethnically conscious" elements in the community, in contradistinction to the exoticizing *Oriental* (P. Wong 1972; Kim 1982:xii). What is more, the new term expresses a political conviction and agenda: it is based on the assumption that regardless of individual origin, background, and desire for self-identification, Asian Americans have been subjected to certain collective experiences that must be acknowledged and resisted. If Asian American subgroups are too small to effect changes in isolation, together they can create a louder voice and greater political leverage vis-à-vis the dominant group (Kim 1982:xiii). Nevertheless, this subsumption of identity as Chinese, Filipino, Korean, Japanese, etc. in a larger pan-Asian identity has to be *voluntarily adopted* and highly *context-sensitive* in order to work; it is not meant to obscure the unique experiences of each subgroup, but merely to provide an instrument for political mobilization under chosen circumstances. Otherwise, the term *Asian American* is in danger of reproducing some of the damage caused by the earlier, stereotypical *Oriental* label (Lyman 1974:173–75).

This double-edged nature of the term *Asian American* is clearly seen when we examine decennial census categories to designate groups of

Asian descent. A glance at the questions pertaining to "Color" or "Race" in *Twenty Censuses: Population and Housing Questions 1790–1980*, compiled by the Bureau of the Census, reveals fluctuations in the official recognition of the Asian American presence. Since the introduction of "Asiatic" in the 1860 census, categories referring to Asian-ancestry Americans have undergone many changes: from "Chinese" in 1870, the categories have proliferated to nine checkoff boxes under the heading of "Asian or Pacific Islander" on the 1990 form (Robey 1989:18). However, the addition and maintenance of new categories have come about primarily as a result of skillful and tenacious lobbying from the Asian American community, which is concerned that inappropriate categories—either overnarrow or overbroad—would jeopardize the Asian Americans' claim in government resource allocation (Lowry 1982:53; Robey 1989:18).[19] The 1990 census is an especially instructive case. Originally, the Bureau of the Census designed a form on which one could write in specific labels under the umbrella category of "Asian or Pacific Islander"; being more cumbersome and open-ended for the respondents, this form would lead to a less accurate picture of the Asian American population. The Asian American community and its advocates in Congress objected vigorously to this lumping, and even after a presidential veto, succeeded in effecting a return to the checkoff format (Robey, 18). In this instance, Asian American subgroups acted in coalition, but the goal of such action is to ensure that interests of diverse subgroups do not get erased: they *united* with each other in order to protect their *separate* interests. In doing so, they illustrate one social science theory that sees ethnic groups as interest groups—political coalitions—rather than anthropological, cultural, linguistic, or religious ones (Petersen 1982:18; Omi and Winant 1986:19).

As even such a brief survey shows, the term *Asian American* is intrinsically complex: it focuses all the contending sociopolitical and cultural forces that affect the daily life of Asian Americans. The uncertainties surrounding everyday usages are part of this picture: though *Asian American* has been gaining increasing acceptance in the public arena, in private most Asian Americans continue to define themselves by reference to the subgroup; in addition, the term may signify "American-born Asians" as well as "persons of mixed Asian and Caucasian parentage." Users of the term, even those within the group itself, cannot count on a consensual usage, but must constantly negotiate its meanings in context.

Transposed to Asian American literary studies, this phenomenon means that critics have not reached any agreement on how their subject matter is to be delimited. Prescriptive usages exist side by side with descriptive ones; some favor a narrow precision, others an expansive catholicity. As Shirley Lim (1990) points out in a conference paper on the intersection of feminist and ethnic literary theories in Asian American

literature, anthologists differ in their criteria for inclusion. In their influential "Introduction" to *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (1974b), Frank Chin and his coeditors operate on the premise that a true Asian American sensibility is non-Christian, nonfeminine, and nonimmigrant; they also limit their selections to three subgroups—Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino—each seen as possessing a distinctive tradition within the broader definition. While this approach has hardened considerably over the years into a rigid distinction between "real" and "fake" Asian American literature in *The Big Aiiieeeee!* (J. Chan et al. 1991), with a concomitant narrowing of focus,[20] a number of recent anthologies, notably those by and about women, counter the practice by broadening the definition of *Asian American* and dispensing with ethnic subgroup designations. For example, Lim and Tsutakawa's *The Forbidden Stitch* and Watanabe and Bruchac's *Home to Stay* both include Korean and Asian Indian writers, some of them first-generation, while Asian Women United of California's *Making Waves*, a multigenre collection, contains selections by Vietnamese authors as well. Like the anthologists, the scholars also differ in the way they elect to demarcate Asian American literature. In her *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context*, Elaine Kim limits her survey to literature written in English by Japanese, Chinese, Korean, and Filipino Americans, citing both ideological, pragmatic, and personal reasons for her decision, but expressing a hope that immigrant writing in the Asian languages will some day be incorporated (1982: xi–xiv). In editing their annotated bibliography of Asian American literature, King-Kok Cheung and Stan Yogi choose a nonprescriptive approach, listing "works by writers of Asian descent who have made the United States or Canada their home, regardless of where they were born, when they settled in North America, and how they interpret their experiences." They also list authors of mixed descent and nonpermanent residents who have written specifically about Asian life in America (1988:v).

This multiplicity of opinions is not an embarrassing symptom of confused thinking or mere factionalism on the part of scholars and critics, but a necessary result of Asian American literature's interdiscursivity in history and in contemporary life. (A good reminder of this fact is the title of Lisa Lowe's 1991 theoretical essay on Asian American "differences"—"Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity.") An Asian American work may allude to Asian classics or folklore, draw upon an oral tradition maintained by immigrant forebears, participate in dominant Western genres like the realist novel or movements like postmodernism, serve class interests, engage in gender politics, and do a host of other things that multiply-situated texts do. At any point in the interpretive process, in order to arrive at an articulation of emphasis satisfactory to themselves, careful readers have to balance the centrifugal and centripetal, the

heterogenizing and homogenizing, tendencies inherent in the term *Asian American literature*. Calibration is all.

Still, whatever their disagreements, and however their foci may shift according to the task at hand, students of Asian American literature tend to be united by a desire to ensure that voices of Asian Americans are heard and to make known the richness and complexity of Asian American writing. Just as the Asian American ethnic group is a political coalition, Asian American literature may be thought of as an emergent and evolving textual coalition, whose interests it is the business of a professional coalition of Asian American critics to promote.[21] Apart from being an intellectual challenge, criticism is also praxis. Unlike those whose subject matter has been canonized and protected by an established power structure, Asian American critics have to establish their professional domain; through doing so, and through disseminating the products of their efforts, they play a role in building their community. For although coalitions necessarily retain a certain degree of provisionality, the very process of creating a coalition feeds back into history, to further realize what has hitherto been tentative and unstable.

To return to the earlier question on how to read Asian American literature, given the constructed status of Asian American literature as a textual coalition, reading, too, involves conscious inhabitation of a reading position. As Diana Fuss reminds us, "there is no 'natural' way to read a text: ways of reading are historically specific and culturally variable, and reading positions are always constructed, assigned, or mapped" (1989:35). Asian American critics have always had choices to make: notably between tracing Asian influence in the texts and demonstrating their grounding in American historical experiences; between accentuating their universal accessibility and uncovering their particular preoccupations. My choice in this study, to focus on the latter of each pair, is based on the conviction that the tendency to "de-Americanize" Asian American literature is too rampant to need any inadvertent abetting. The literatures of other major peoples of color in the United States, though also vulnerable to exoticization, are less susceptible in this regard: Native Americans, being the indigenous inhabitants of the North American continent, cannot be regarded as foreign;[22] Chicanos can also draw on a long history of settlement predating the Anglos' arrival, while as a result of slavery, the culture that African Americans have had to develop is indisputably American. In contrast, Asian American writers, however rooted on this land they or their families may have been, tend to be regarded as direct transplants from Asia or as custodians of an esoteric subculture.[23] Thus it is incumbent upon Asian American critics to orient discussions away from exoticization and to ensure that the word *American* is not blithely excised from the term *Asian American*.

Two key terms that will appear frequently in my study, *contexts* and *intertexts*, reflect my priorities in developing a reading strategy tied to the above concept of Asian American literature as a textual coalition. *Contexts* is an allusion to Elaine Kim's book on Asian American literature, whose subtitle, *An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context*, stresses the indispensability of historical knowledge to any responsible reading of the corpus. In pluralizing the term *context*, I affirm and extend Kim's project but also seek to underscore my conviction that, given the multiple subject positions of the writers, there is no single, conclusive version of Asian American history to anchor their works and safeguard "correct" readings. Rather, the critic has to select from a number of possible contexts, each serviceable for a different purpose, in which to read a given text. My emphasis on context aligns this study with "new historicist" critical projects in general, which include, in one scholar's handy synopsis, "a return to empirical scholarship, revivals of the critique of ideology, studies of how material conditions determine writing and publication, research on gender, race, and class in the production of literature, and inquiries into the structural affinities of representational and social systems" (Jay 1988:1).[24]

The second term crucial to the establishment of my reading practice, *intertexts*, has a poststructuralist genealogy—Kristeva's concept of intertextuality, which regards "any text" to be "constructed as a mosaic of quotations" and "the absorption and transformation of another" (1980:37)—at first sight incongruent with the new historicist agenda. Nevertheless, my use of the term *intertexts* again highlights choice and praxis. Instead of theorizing about intertextuality at a high level of abstraction, I give a name and habitation to the phrase *any text*: I specifically address the question of which texts, among many possible candidates in many possible discursive traditions, a given Asian American text is to be juxtaposed with and read against. "Quoting," "absorbing," and "transforming" presuppose a relationship, yet relationships between texts are not naturally occurring connections passively awaiting an elaborating intelligence. The perception that two texts are relatable at all, and that the relationship between them is not trivial, is not ideologically innocent. While a dominant literary tradition may be conveniently reified, so that intertextuality within it appears to map the intrinsic or the self-evident, the reading of "minority" texts like Asian American ones demands the much more fundamental (and conscious) operation of determining appropriate intertexts for them. Without such a deliberation, any analysis that aspires beyond the boundaries of the single text would, by default, be governed by monocultural notions of canonicity. The resulting intercourse between the selected texts, then, would simply replicate the asymmetrical sociopolitical relationships in the extratextual

realm, and the task of deepening one's understanding of an Asian American literary tradition is brought up short. The spirit in which I explore intertextuality in this study is catholic—I consider a wide range of possible intertexts for the Asian American works under consideration—but what interests me first and foremost is how mutual allusion, qualification, complication, and transmutation can be discovered between texts regarded as Asian American, and how a sense of an internally meaningful literary tradition may emerge from such an investigation.

The manner in which I employ the term *intertextuality* departs considerably from received usages in Euro-American high theory. In the French tradition, intertextuality takes such an extreme deconstructive form that it not only dissolves the autonomous, intentional subject but also precludes the validity of any extratextual reality—indeed contradicts the very notion of context itself. Nonetheless, intertextuality has never been a monolithic concept to begin with,[25] and by now the term *intertextuality* has become sufficiently part of a general critical lexicon to admit of varied applications (O'Donnell and Davis 1989a:xiii). The more flexible definition of intertextuality I subscribe to may be described by Thaïs Morgan's formulation: a rethinking of literature and literary history "in terms of space instead of time, conditions of possibility instead of permanent structures, and 'networks' or 'webs' instead of chronological lines or influence" (1989:274).

O'Donnell and Davis note that intertextuality is an anxiety-provoking concept: it "signals an *anxiety* and an *indeterminacy* regarding authorial, readerly, or textual identity, the relation of present culture to past, or the function of writing within certain historical and political frameworks" (1989a:xiii; italics in original). They go on to ask: "Can the discussion of intertextuality successfully address problems of extra-literary reference, or is its explosive force merely 'interlinear' . . . ? How sound, ideologically, is the investment in the attention to and appraisal of the intertextual process?" (xv).

The issues raised by O'Donnell and Davis are especially relevant to critics of marginalized literatures. For some (e.g., R. B. Miller), anxiety stems from suspicion of the poststructuralist idea of the infinite play of signifiers on which intertextuality is based; allowing that texts are open and derive meaning from each other poses the risk of hermeticizing them, or as Miller puts it, "sever[ing] most ethical ties to the world outside the game itself" (1987:394).[26] However, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., shows in his intertextual reading of Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker, intertextuality need not imply a divorce from the extratextual world of values. It is possible to put intertextuality to use for a minority literature, by investigating models "for a self-defined, or an internally defined, notion of tradition" (1989:166). Along similar lines, I maintain

that the concept of intertextuality need not be a source of misgivings for Asian American critics; rather, it could inspire them to attend more closely to the myriad ways in which texts grouped under the Asian American rubric build upon, allude to, refine, controvert, and resonate with each other. In doing so, they contribute to a sense of an Asian American literary tradition. This tradition is not an observer-independent parade of texts canonized by putatively objective standards of excellence; instead, it is a representation constituted by praxis: informed and "interested" (or "motivated") close reading and critical analysis.

The following four chapters essay this kind of reading, which is always a meticulous negotiation of meaning among competing claims for attention. Each chapter focuses on a motif that could, if one so chooses, support homogenizing generalizations and minimize the differences between Asian American texts and European or Anglo-American ones. While acknowledging elements of meaning shared with dominant traditions, I try to demonstrate how Asian American deployments of the motif, when contextualized and read intertextually, form distinctive patterns.

My primary sources are mostly prose narratives—novels, novellas, autobiographies, short stories—because, relative to works in other genres, they are likely to exhibit more readily discernible linkages to the extratextual world and are therefore more amenable to my project. Personal inclination is also a factor: not only have my training and research interests always been in fiction but, given the rapidly increasing size and variety of the Asian American corpus, I feel a multigenre study would simply be beyond my powers. As a result, I have applied myself to mostly fiction and autobiography and, to a lesser extent, drama; poetry will make at most a sporadic appearance in the following chapters. Nevertheless, I trust that the broader issues I address here are generalizable enough that the term *literature* in the title of my book is not a misnomer.

Chapter 1 identifies several ways in which Asian American writers use alimentary images (which derive from bodily functions common to all human beings) to explore issues of economic and cultural survival. Chapter 2, on the double or doppelgänger, argues that while the figure was first identified in European literature, the psychological mechanisms generating it take on different forms under different historical circumstances, and that Asian American manifestations are specifically concerned with assimilation. Chapter 3 contends that "mainstream" myths of unfettered mobility, a key component in American ideology, do not apply to Asian Americans because of historical circumscription of their legal and social freedoms; writers in each Asian subgroup have developed symbolic strategies to engage this issue. Chapter 4, on images of art and artists, maintains that in showing an intense interest in the "play-

ful" and seemingly gratuitous aspect of artistic creation, Asian American authors are not, as a mechanical analogy with universalistic Western ludic discourse would suggest, promoting a rarefied aestheticism. Instead, they are formulating an "interested disinterestedness" appropriate to their condition as minority artists with responsibilities to their community but also a need for room to exercise their creativity. The first two chapters devote more space to the fine points of devising a reading practice appropriate for Asian American literature; in particular, because of the European origin of the double figure, chapter 2 gives more consideration than usual to existing scholarship on the subject. Whenever possible, potential comparisons with uses of the motif in other minority American literatures will be pointed out. (The exception is chapter 1, because of the profusion of semiotic approaches available on the vast subject of food and eating.)

The four chapters are woven together by two terms, *Necessity* and *Extravagance*, derived from two passages in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* respectively on Brave Orchid's thrifty habits and the adulterous liaison of the "no name woman."

> My mother has told me once and for all the useful parts [of the no name woman's story]. She will add nothing unless powered by Necessity, a riverbank that guides her life. She plants vegetables rather than lawns; she carries the odd-shaped tomatoes home from the fields and eats food left for the gods. (1977:6)

> Adultery is extravagance. Could people who hatch their own chicks and eat the embryos and the heads for delicacies and boil the feet in vinegar for party food, leaving only the gravel, eating even the gizzard lining, could such people engender a prodigal aunt? (7)

The terms *Necessity* and *Extravagance*[27] signify two contrasting modes of existence and operation, one contained, survival-driven and conservation-minded, the other attracted to freedom, excess, emotional expressiveness, and autotelism. All four motifs studied can be related to these modes. *Necessity* usually appears with words like *force*, *demand*, or *constraint*; *Extravagance* with words like *urge*, *impulse*, or *desire*. This might hint at an outer-inner dichotomy, pitting "objective" or "neutral" conditions against individual vagaries. However, the disposition of the study as a whole is constructionist. The concepts of Necessity and Extravagance, themselves deconstructible, function mainly rhetorically, to tie together related tendencies; the collocations used with the two terms should therefore be taken as descriptions of perception, which is contingent upon concrete social circumstances. Because Necessity and Extravagance operate at a high level of abstraction, there is always a dan-

ger that they will reduce historical experiences to schemata and parable; only a scrupulous grappling with textual complexities can counteract this bias.

In addition, my chosen terms of analysis, because of their bias toward "content," do not leave much room for investigating possible tensions between the thematic import and the stylistic inflections of a work. Certainly a lesson in Extravagance might be subverted by an austere manner of presentation, or a plea for Necessity might be couched in such an Extravagant form that its persuasiveness becomes questionable. Hisaye Yamamoto's understated mother-daughter stories about the perils of repressed life come readily to mind as an example of the former. The latter contradiction is a source of disorientation for the narrator/protagonist of *The Woman Warrior*, whose mother mixes inhibiting messages with imaginative wordplay and to that extent embodies the author's own proclivity toward exuberance. These and related cases will be examined in chapter 4, where I undertake a radical unpacking of the Necessity/Extravagance binarism through close readings of selected Asian American ludic discourse. Elsewhere, formalist observations are typically incidental or subordinate to the thematic argument.

As my entire book (and especially chapter 4) will make clear, I do assume a common human psychology at certain levels of analysis, which also implies a belief in the power of literature to communicate across cultural boundaries. (Otherwise I would hardly have been engaged in the teaching and study of Asian American literature.) This does not mean, however, that my faith is unqualified by an acute awareness of social realities, or that I consider demonstrating the common humanity of Asian Americans, as communicated through their writings, to be a particularly worthwhile or useful focus for Asian American critics at this point. Much depends on one's assessment of what kind of work is needed in given situations. The same goes for the question of "Americanness." Disentangling Asian American literature from Orientalist expectations—that is, establishing its American character and presence—is a major mission of this book. Yet given the Asian American past and current interracial relations, the best way for the group to "claim America" (to employ Kingston's term in *China Men*) may well be to *differentiate* Asian American symbolic configurations from those considered "mainstream American." It does not consist, as Sollors proposes in his essay on the direction for American studies, in proving that "mules," "mares," and "even stallions" are all "quadrupeds" (1990a:186). Universalism is not, as he seems to deplore, "passé" (181), but *premature* (see also Wald 1987:30–32). Considering how much more one needs to know about minority literatures in order to establish an adequate understanding of their traditions, the practice of drawing simplis-

tic, ill-informed parallels with the dominant tradition would most likely have a leveling and suppressing effect. In that case, the abstract idea of a national culture might be preserved, but only at the expense of what would make it truly valuable: its richness. In his "Canon Theory and Emergent Practice," Paul Lauter has argued persuasively that "neither separation nor integration provide wholly satisfactory methods for presenting or studying marginalized cultures," and that a "dual process" involving both is needed to do justice to the plural realities of American literature (1991:165). To Lauter's formulation may I add that separation and integration are not, everyday usage notwithstanding, discrete or disjunctive mechanisms. Since separation is always separation *from* something, the two entities must already have borne some integral relationship to each other for the notion of division to make sense; likewise, integration is not thinkable without some prior divergence. Given the close mutual implication of separation and integration, it is not surprising to find that an ostensibly integrationist rhetoric often conceals an exclusionist intent, whereas an ostensibly separatist approach might well express an ultimately unifying cultural vision. In my study, I try to avoid the dangers of both a hermetic ethnic essentialism and a premature foreclosure of differentiation, but especially the latter.

A few concluding clarifications of terminology may be in order. The terms *race* and *ethnicity* (and their adjectival forms) are highly problematic. Both words have accrued highly partisan ideological associations, and conflating them frequently leads to consequences damaging to minorities (Petersen 1982:7; Omi and Winant 1986:23). At the same time, the two words are indeed often used interchangeably. In the post-Nazi era, *ethnicity* has come to serve, to some extent, as a euphemism for *race*; such a usage has been adopted by not only neoconservatives but also advocates of minority rights (as in "ethnic studies departments" or "multiethnic American literature"). Petersen notes that "the separation of the two terms has been inhibited . . . by the confusion in real life between physiological and cultural criteria" (1982:6). Given the looseness of everyday usage, it would be difficult to adhere to a single word choice. In the present study, I have availed myself of some of the advantages of this fuzziness. But on the whole, and especially in chapter 2 on the double figure, I favor an emphasis on race, partly to avoid confusion with the aforementioned "ethnicity school," and partly to take into account Omi and Winant's persuasive demonstration of the continuing importance of race in American life.

The term *mainstream*, as in *mainstream literature*, is problematic to the extent that it encourages what Lauter so aptly calls "the Great River theory of American Letters," which implies noncanonical works to be

merely "minor rills and branches" (1990:9). Such a hidden metaphor would undermine, to however subliminal an extent, the very autonomy of the Asian American literary tradition that this book seeks to establish. Nevertheless, as a shorthand label describing the current imbalance of discursive power, *mainstream* continues to be convenient and will appear in the following chapters in quotation marks only when special attention to its disputed status is called for. The same goes for a term like *minority literature*, which again could be argued to be an unconscious replication of hegemonic cultural values.

As for the terms used in thematic analysis, such as *theme*, *motif*, *image*, *symbol*, or *metaphor*, much ambiguity exists, especially in view of the Continental lineage of the method and the differences between German and English usage (Weisstein 1973:124–49). Ziolkowski's distinction between *motif*, *theme*, and *symbol*, as opposed to the more general *image* (1977:3–17), is to my mind the most convincing clarification available on the subject. Nevertheless, partly because Ziolkowski's scheme is designed to organize a specific set of materials (15), in practice it is difficult to implement it consistently. I have opted for less technically precise usages.

In the majority of cases in this book, the *American* in *Asian American* refers to the United States, but it must be stretched to mean "North American" in reference to Canadian writer Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981). The practice of including Kogawa in the Asian American roster is standard in the field. Perhaps it is because scholars feel that *Obasan*, so exemplary in its integration of political understanding and literary artistry, is simply too good to pass up: it has proven equally effective as an eye-opening course reading, as an indisputably respectable subject of formalist inquiry, and as a powerful weapon to defend minority literatures against uninformed charges of inferiority. Perhaps they prize *Obasan* for its authentication of a pan-Asian sensibility, by so compellingly bringing out parallels between Asian experiences in the United States and Canada. Or perhaps the subsumption of "Asian Canadian" under "Asian American" is a matter of temporary, strategic alliance-forging—a coalition, to use our earlier term again—since the Asian American (U.S.) corpus has so far been more substantial than the Asian Canadian and its critical study more established.[28] Under other circumstances and for other purposes, Asian Canadian literature can and should be differentiated from Asian American; perhaps, as publications become more numerous,[29] a separate Asian Canadian critical tradition will arise. In the meantime, this book will continue to draw on *Obasan* as a key text in Asian American literature.

This question of under what rubric to study *Obasan* uncovers a potential problem with my chosen methodology that must be addressed

before we turn to the thematic chapters. As the Kogawa example shows, the classificatory scheme and reading strategy adopted in this study have to maintain an extremely delicate balance between historicity and ahistoricity. In grouping together texts that could be placed in narrower, historically more familiar ethnic categories, and in extracting common imagery to formulate an Asian American tradition, the intertextual investigation I offer in the following pages is in danger of lapsing into what Shelley Wong (1990) calls "literary strip-mining." That is to say, ahistoricity, decontextualization, insufficient respect for the integrity of each work and the complex intents and operations of each author—the very ills the reading strategy has been devised to counter—could result from too steady a gaze on isolated aspects of content. The only way to forestall such an ironic possibility is to be vigilant of the localization and segmentation inherent in the motif-study method and to reinsert the detached imagery into its specific, differentiating history as soon as intertextual affinity is demonstrated. Thus is a constant back-and-forth movement sustained between commonality and uniqueness, generalization and particularization, but the overall emphasis is still on a collectivity of visions derived from shared experiences. This choice of emphasis is determined not only by my training and temperament, with their inevitable idiosyncracies and blind spots, but also by my conscious assessment of what gaps need to be filled in Asian American literary studies at this juncture in its development. If my book succeeds, however modestly, in establishing a sense of Asian American literature's historical coherence, thereby providing a conceptual basis for the discipline beyond accidents of authorial nativity and the tacit consensus of practitioners, the risk of temporarily evoking a transcendent thematic unity would have been well worth taking.