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Exploring Asian American literary style : Janice Mirikitani and Ronyoung Kim

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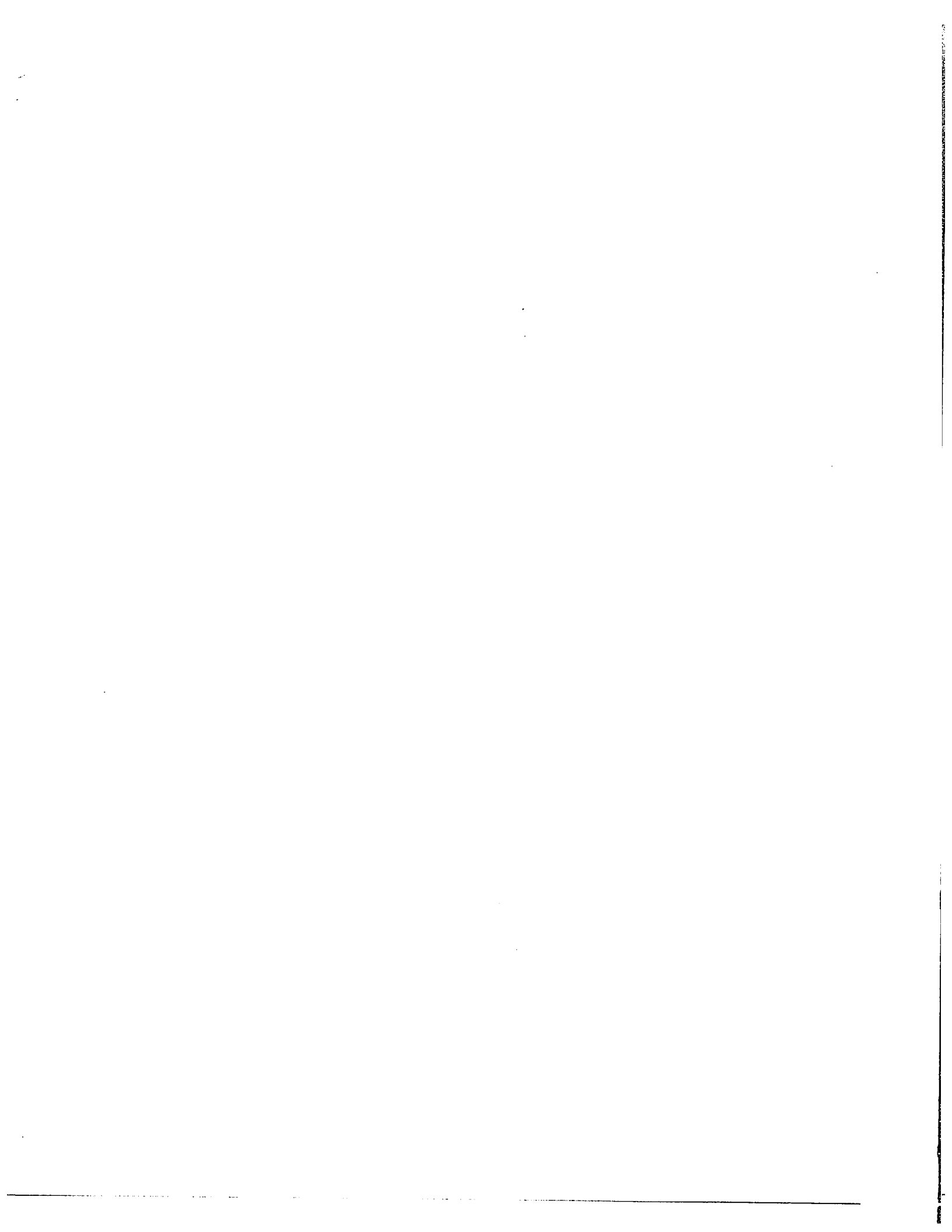
**Exploring Asian American literary style: Janice Mirikitani and
Ronyoung Kim**

Salvin, Christina Kim, M.A.

San Jose State University, 1994

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EXPLORING ASIAN AMERICAN LITERARY STYLE:
JANICE MIRIKITANI AND RONYOUNG KIM

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English
San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by

Christina Kim Salvin

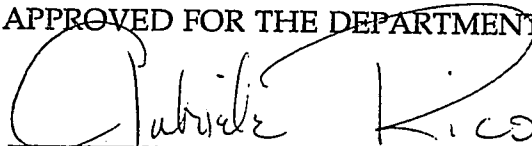
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ABSTRACT

EXPLORING ASIAN AMERICAN LITERARY STYLE: JANICE MIRIKITANI AND RONYOUNG KIM

by Christina Kim Salvin

The primary objective of this thesis is to begin increased literary discourse on Asian American literary style. It examines the political and economic forces in American society which have shaped perceptions of Asian Americans, their literature, and its criticism, which has thus far been predominantly theme-centered. With the recent explosion of Asian American literature and scholarship, this thesis urges a critical move toward examining issues of style with emphasis equal to that devoted to discussions of socio-historic context.

Poet Janice Mirikitani, author of Shedding Silence, and novelist Ronyoung Kim, author of Clay Walls, are discussed with attention to personal/political/social context as well to their shared stylistic strategy of juxtaposition, more commonly recognized as paradox. Suggested is that many other Asian American authors employ such a strategy; this thesis hints at understanding an Asian American stylistic intertextuality that will hopefully be further explored in the future.

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Without my mother, the motivation to write would not exist. Without Catherine and Conrad, I almost gave up. And thank you Rodel, for going against character to become a nag when I needed it.

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Introduction and Critical Framework

As an Asian American activist/journalist/literature student in the late 1980s, I evaluated literary works based on their ability to catalyze empowerment and revolution; now, I am forced to revise my stance dramatically. The same works still speak to me: those that as a Korean American I can relate to in their portrayals of the struggle against racism, generational conflict, and cultural pride. However, a singular mind-opening experience, followed by the awareness graduate study brings, has compelled me to look beyond sociopolitical consideration into issues of style.

In the spring of 1990, I was scheduled to take the oral examination needed to complete my bachelor's degree in American literature at the University of California at Santa Cruz. I was prepared to discuss each work on my book list from a political perspective, having forged thematic links and analyses. The examination was going smoothly until Professor Gloria Hull (now Akasha Hull) asked, "What about style?" My mouth dropped open. I had no idea what to say. I didn't even know what style was. In my literature classes at UCSC, I wrote papers examining representations of oppression, resistance, and imperialism--no one had ever asked me to write about 'style.' I did not even recall any of my professors broaching considerations of style in the classroom, except for Gloria Hull.

One year previous to my oral exam, in the course *Black Women Writers*, I was angry at Professor Hull's teaching methods. Her constant emphasis on form, technique, and language seemed directed at the white students in the class, ignoring the African American women and other students of color. Then, I saw Hull's focus as an attempt to convince non-

believers that Black women actually had writing talent, when in my mind she should have directed a more empowering discussion of theme and politics at those of us who innately believed in African American women writers' inclusion in the canon. Dismissing issues of style as unnecessary and unrevolutionary, I nearly accused Hull of 'selling out' in the course evaluation at the end of the quarter.

In the midst of my orals, the memory of my criticism of Hull came rushing back. It dawned upon me that my former professor was extracting vengeance for my comments against her teaching approach. At the time, I resented Hull and saw no other motive to her relentless questioning about style than spite, resented that I was forced to re-take my examination and demonstrate my understanding of style. After researching some literary criticism in the library, I passed my orals with what I thought was 'BS.' I did not appreciate Professor Hull's lesson until two years later, in graduate school at San Jose State University.

For the purposes of a seminar paper during my first semester as a graduate student, I manipulated Janice Mirikitani's poetry into the Imagist tradition. While my argument was well-supported, I myself wasn't convinced. As a long-time admirer of Mirikitani's powerful, vivid poetry, I suddenly gained the desire to honestly delve into the source of her work's strength. I felt that it was not only the issues she confronted, for I had read many Asian American writers who spoke to racism, violence, familial conflict, revolution. Why then was I more drawn to Mirikitani? Questions of style began to surface in my mind. "How does the *way* a poem is written contribute to what it says?" Gloria Hull's voice echoed in my ear. I began to delve into Asian American literary criticism, searching for answers; finally, I

realized that I could no longer consider a work innately valuable on the basis of its political or cultural characteristics.

Unfortunately, the field of Asian American literary criticism offers very few answers to questions of style (which I loosely define for the time being as an author's means of expression--the methods s/he uses to convey ideas). With the exception of works on Maxine Hong Kingston, most criticism I encountered focused predominantly on sociohistorical context, political ramifications, or theme, rather than on technique, form, or style. A few years ago at UC Santa Cruz, I would have welcomed such an emphasis unquestioningly; however, I now recognize the danger in examining Asian American writings solely on the basis of thematic considerations, for to do so is to invalidate the body of work as literature.

If discussions of style are not brought into play, Asian American literature loses its status as art, becoming merely historical account, political essay, or propaganda. I realized that to look at a work's value in promoting revolution is not necessarily a revolutionary critical tactic--precisely for such an approach, conservative upholders of the traditional canon disavow Asian American literature as inconsequential. Thus, to truly revolutionize the literary canon, critics must examine the stylistic and formal aspects of Asian American works, thereby recognizing our writers as gifted and skilled contributors to the field of literature.

Critics, however, are slow to recognize Asian American literature at all, let alone as stylistically skilled pieces deserving scholarly discussion. In delving into reasons for such oversight, it is first necessary to separate mainstream from Asian American critics of literature. I define mainstream critics as those scholars of literature responsible for creating and maintaining

the traditional elite canon comprised mostly of works by white males. Though women and people of color are slowly gaining inclusion in the mainstream, it cannot be overlooked that within most departments of literature, critical publications, and even graduate programs, diversity is still the exception rather than the rule. Most Asian American literature scholars would agree: Amy Ling, co-editor of the 1992 anthology, Reading the Literatures of Asian America, notes that "most English departments tend to be bastions of cultural colonialism" (Ling, "Emerging Canons"191). This traditional orientation of most departments of English prompts me to define mainstream literary critics as those in the majority: predominantly Euro-American scholars who have made no scholarly efforts toward redefining the canon. Similarly, I define Asian American literary critics as those scholars, predominantly Asian American in ethnicity, whose research and publishing endeavors are focused on Asian American literature. Euro-American scholars such as Aldon Nielsen, whose work has been in African American literature, and Renny Christopher, whose study has been in Vietnamese literature, are excluded from my definition of the mainstream. Asian and other ethnic American critics who concentrate on traditional English or American literature shall be placed within my conceptualization of the mainstream, which I see as based more on academic orientation than ethnic origin, although for the most part the two are closely linked.

That Asian American literature has been so underacknowledged stems heavily from widespread American racism. Asian Americans have been producing literature since their arrival to America in the 1800s, but pervasive barriers prevent its recognition. Caught in the midst of a student struggle for the hiring of an Asian American history professor in 1989, a Stanford

administrator stated that Asians haven't been in this country long enough to have a history which merits the teaching of an entire course. Deemed perpetual foreigners, Asian Americans and their contributions to American society have been ignored in popular culture and in versions of history. As ethnic studies professor Elaine Kim aptly states, "Asian voices have been muted by the dominant culture's...insistence that 'Asian' and 'American' are incompatible" (Kim, Reading the Literatures xii). This construction of racial otherness denies Asians validity in America--their lives, struggles, accomplishments, and art.

Prevalent is the notion that we (I write from an Asian American perspective) are the 'yellow peril'--hordes of foreigners who threaten the position of this country's 'true' Americans. The treatment of Asian Americans as "strangers from a different shore" (Ronald Takaki coined the term and theme for the title of his 1989 text) can be traced throughout history¹: In 1790, Asian immigrants were barred from naturalized citizenship reserved for whites only; *People vs. Hall* in 1854 ruled that Chinese, like Blacks and Native Americans, could not testify against whites in courts of law; from 1882 to World War II, Chinese Exclusion Acts banned Chinese laborers from immigrating to the US as a result of violent scapegoating which held the Chinese responsible for the plight of the white worker (although they were a mere .02% of the population and worked mainly in sectors undesirable to whites); in 1907 the Gentlemen's Agreement was enacted, a polite way of terming a 'Japanese Exclusion Act'; the 1913 Alien Land Law, targeting Japanese Americans, prevented those ineligible to citizenship from owning land; again aimed toward Japanese Americans, 1924 immigration legislation denied entry to all those ineligible to citizenship, strengthening

the barriers erected against the Japanese in 1907; all persons of Japanese ancestry (two-thirds of whom were American citizens) were unconstitutionally incarcerated in concentration camps during World War II, although there was no evidence of disloyalty or threat to national security. While life for European immigrants may have been full of hardship and prejudice, never was such racial legislation enacted to prevent their entrance to the US or their constitutional rights from being enjoyed; furthermore, whites have been seen throughout history as the rightful inhabitants of America, the rightful reapers of its rewards.

Even today, Asian Americans are blamed for economic crises: Governors Deukmejian and Wilson have attributed California's budget woes to Asian and Latin American immigrants²; the abuse of the welfare system is commonly associated with Southeast Asians, Mexicans, and Blacks, though white women are its highest percentage of users³; and competition with Japan has aroused a 'new yellow peril,' which Asian Americans like Vincent Chin have paid for with their lives⁴. While US companies close their American factories and relocate to Third World countries with scant government regulations concerning workers' wages, health, safety, or benefits, while America spends millions of dollars on militarization, foreign wars, corporate tax breaks, and S&L bail-outs, and while America cuts billions in social services and education each year, the nation of Japan spends nearly all of its resources in domestic development of education, transportation, and corporation. However, the rise of Japan-bashing situates the American system as a victim rather than a perpetrator of economic decline; Japan has been labeled the economic enemy of the 'defenseless' US, stigmatizing Japanese Americans and other Asian Americans as well.⁵ Unfortunately,

many people in America cannot distinguish between Japanese and Japanese Americans; nor can they separate Japanese from Chinese Americans, Korean Americans, Filipino Americans, Vietnamese Americans, and so forth.

It is all too clear that Japan is being used as a convenient scapegoat for this country's mismanagement, clear that Asian Americans are suffering dearly from such scapegoating. In 1982, Vincent Chin, a Chinese American, was beaten to death with a baseball bat by two white men who called him a 'Jap,' cursing, "'It's because of you motherfuckers that we're out of work'" (Takaki 481). Found guilty, Ronald Ebens and Michael Nitz each paid a \$3,780 fine and spent not a single day in jail for Chin's murder, as the judge deemed them good men with natural frustrations who made only the mistake of getting drunk. We also cannot forget the recent Stockton massacre of Southeast Asian schoolchildren, a classified hate crime stemming not only from employment frustrations from but a man's anger that his old neighborhood was being taken over by those he felt had no right. On an everyday basis, Asian Americans such as myself are told to "Go back to your own country where you belong"; we are called 'nips,' 'gooks,' and 'chinks,' regardless of whether we are first or fifth generation Americans. I have been approached countless times by white Americans who ask what country I'm from and won't take "this one" for an answer.

If Asian Americans are not viewed as legitimate Americans, but rather foreigners with no history or place in this country, then it is no wonder our literature is not canonized; to many, it does not exist. The common conceptions of Asians as foreigners in America lends to the perception that we cannot speak or write fluently in English; thus, our ability to produce great works of literature is often doubted or overlooked entirely by the

mainstream. That we are pigeonholed as a left-brained race of math and computer nerds with no creativity or communication skills, content to drudge away silently and obediently in little cubicles for minimal pay, also contributes to our perceived lack of literary skill. Since the 1800s, Asians have been regarded as worker bees devoid of personality, whose function in American society, rather than to produce art or assume leadership roles, is to take orders and accomplish mass labor--whether for the Transcontinental Railroad and Hawaii plantations of yesterday, or the data entry, microchip processing, and garment industry of today. Through shifts in time and occupational stratification, that society's stereotypes of Asian Americans have remained the same in basic nature is clear Asian American studies scholars such as Sau-ling Wong of the University of California at Berkeley:

From the 'coolies' of the nineteenth century to today's technicians and nonmanagerial professionals, the historical role of Asian Americans has been to serve the interests of the dominant society as 'good workers': industrious, focused, dependable, accomodating, serious-minded, and eminently useful" (210).

Such roles do not require leadership or communication skills, do not demand creativity or individuality; thus, people are usually amazed that my mother is the *director* of a well-known *art* gallery. And I cannot count the times I have encountered incredulous expressions when I say that I am an English major--but I *can* count on one hand all the Asian American students and teachers in both my undergraduate and graduate programs. Negative stereotypes have permeated the American mentality so totally that for generations Asian Americans have internalized them, allowing themselves to be pushed away from the arts by self-doubt and societal expectation.

Perhaps the most insidious stereotype to be internalized by Asian Americans and embraced by American society is that of the 'model minority.'

Common is the belief that Asian Americans have overcome the barriers of racism and economic hardship to 'make it' in the United States through discipline, uncomplaining hard work, and strong family and educational values. The so-called success of Asian Americans has been held up as a model for other minorities to follow since the 1960s, as a tool for invalidating protests and criticisms against the government. During the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans were given the message that rebellion was meaningless, as the system was indeed fair to those who behaved obediently and diligently like Asian Americans. Since, the model minority myth has been used to argue for affirmative action cutbacks and reductions in social service spending.

Put simply, those who depict Asians as the 'model minority' believe that American society is indeed an egalitarian one, with opportunities for all individuals who make the effort to achieve a means of material well-being. If someone or a certain group does not 'make it,' at least part of the fault lies with that person or group (Chan, Asian Californians 156).

Thus, it is no wonder that the model minority myth has stirred ethnic tensions between Asian Americans and other people of color, no wonder that services are continually denied to Asian Americans in need of assistance, whether it be in employment, education, or health care. In a 1992 campus-wide forum, Ray Lou, former Asian American Studies Department Chair and Associate Academic Vice President of Undergraduate Studies, commented that more Asian Americans live below the poverty line than any other group in the city of San Jose, and that at San Jose State University, Asian Americans report the highest percentages of low-income households. However, such information is little-known, whereas most of us are familiar with the 'whiz

kids' and business world achievers who receive constant media attention.

Asian American historian Sucheng Chan points out that while

a small number of upwardly mobile professionals and capitalist entrepreneurs...get the media limelight,...a far larger population...is underemployed and poor, trapped in low-paying, insecure, nonunionized menial jobs, and and largely invisible to the outside world. The poorly educated old-timers...and the new immigrants who speak little English or none at all, eke out a living as janitors, waiters, busboys, and sewing factory workers...The pressing human needs of this segment of the Asian American population are either underserved or not met, their plight camouflaged by the apparent success of the professionals and expatriate capitalists (Chan, Asian Californians 143).

Without grounding in Asian American studies, it is easy to believe the research which cites Asians as earning higher median family incomes than whites, easy to overlook what the studies leave out: the fact that in the Asian American family, more people work than in the white family; that Asian Americans are concentrated in urban areas where wages and living expenses are higher than in the rest of the country; and that for statistical purposes, Hispanics (generally lower-income) were included as whites, pushing down income figures for white families (Chan, Asian Americans 168-169). From my experiences, even the most multiculturally informed and involved literary professors/scholars are largely unaware of the dynamics of the model minority myth, unaware of its dangers and the true conditions faced in Asian American communities today.

Fortunately, however, mainstream readers and critics of literature are recognizing that their knowledge of the Asian American experience is limited or based on stereotypes; thus, best-selling works such as Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior (1976) or Amy Tan's Joy Luck Club (1989) are actively sought out, often producing feelings of enlightenment in their readers. A common response from a mainstream critic resonates with the

sentiment, "A-ha! So *this* is the Chinese American woman's experience!" When a reader approaches an Asian American work from a standpoint ignorant of sociohistorical reference, s/he often tends to consider that work predominantly as a provider of sociohistorical information. Indeed, Asian American literature

give[s] voice to the perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and aspirations of a heterogeneous group whose members have until recently been seen as quiet, unassertive, foreign. By breaking silence, Asian American writers and artists are shattering the negative stereotypes that have dominated the wider public view of their people (Chan, Asian Californians 167).

Thus, that Asian American literature is a harbinger of enlightenment for the mainstream is a positive phenomenon, an important step toward multicultural understanding. However, such a phenomenon lends itself to a form of Asian American literary scholarship that is predominantly based on theme. Kingston criticism provides both an example and an exception.

It is possible to discuss mainstream interpretations of Kingston because, within the general populace, she is the most recognized and acclaimed Asian American writer today, perhaps the only one to achieve canonization. Many literature professors still equate Kingston with Asian American literature, as hers is the only name they know. She appears more frequently in anthologies, readers, and course syllabi than any other Asian American author. With such a wide readership, Kingston's comments on reviews of The Woman Warrior are not surprising: "...the critics measur[ed] the book and me against the stereotype of the inscrutable, mysterious oriental. About two-thirds of the reviews did this" (55). Kingston, to her chagrin, cites handfulls of mainstream critics who alternately praised or disparaged her

novel based on its ability to fulfill their ignorant fantasies of the exotic alien, the inexplicable foreigner of the East.

Scholars more evolved in their understanding of the Asian American experience rely on theme rather than on stereotypes, attempting to cut through Kingston's layers of meaning. Such theme-based analyses stem from popular conception of Kingston's work as purely autobiography rather than as the melding of genres evident to most Asian American scholars, who see The Woman Warrior as "part biography, part autobiography, part history, part fantasy, part fiction, part myth," (Lim, Approaches x). Kingston's work was marketed as autobiography precisely to reach the mainstream, for whom it is easier to accept the idea of a Chinese American woman writing non-fictional testimony rather than "the great American novel," (57-58) as was Kingston's literary aim. Though articles such as "The Search for Identity in The Woman Warrior," "Gender vs. Ethnicity in Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior," "Thematic Threads in Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior," and "Telling the Mother's Story: History and Connection in the Autobiography of Maxine Hong Kingston" provide valuable thematic and sociocultural contextualization, they do not address issues of style.

Yet in sheer numbers there is room for growth. So many critical articles have been generated on Kingston's work--more than on most other Asian American writers combined--that among the misreadings and the thematic representations, close textual analyses of style, form, and language have appeared from mainstream and Asian American critics alike. Thus Kingston is also the exception: her novels are examined "from the point of view of anthropology, folklore, sociology, linguistics, theology, history, and psychology" (Kim, "Such Opposite Creatures" 79), not to mention mythology,

feminism, ethnopoetics, and postmodernism. On the other hand, most other Asian American authors are so underaddressed in critical circles that each has only a handful of articles which illuminate their works, leaving little room for discussion beyond the sociohistoric/thematic considerations that are the necessary building blocks of more formal studies.

It is necessary to ask why Kingston's works command vast predominance in the Asian American literary critical arena. One eminent scholar of Asian American literature (who shall remain nameless at this time) asserted in a recent conversation that the proliferation of Kingston-criticism is a result of the accessibility of her themes to the mainstream; that white American society easily finds within her work the success story of the downtrodden immigrant's struggle to become American. Though such a statement seems overly simplistic--as it is not only mainstream critics but renowned scholars of Asian American literature such as Sau-ling Wong and King-Kok Cheung who devote their energies to Kingston's novels, and as many Asian American works can be manipulated into similar readings of 'model minority' success stories--it raises an important issue of not only style but quality as well. In conferences, forums, new publications, and emerging doctoral theses, why do Asian American critics not only focus disproportionately on Kingston scholarship but do so in a way more deeply cognizant of stylistic elements than in discussions of other authors? Why do Asian American critics more freely praise Kingston as brilliant, beautiful--one of "our best 'ethnic' writers today" (Ling, "Emerging Canons" 196)? Is this phenomenon merely a rub-off of mainstream literary values? Do Asian American critics hold those same values? If so, what are they? If not, how do they differ? How do other Asian American writers measure up to Kingston?

If praise of Kingston is indigenous to the Asian American literary community, what makes Kingston 'better' than the rest? Perhaps, using Kingston has been the necessary foundation for Asian American critical perspectives to gain respect in the mainstream literary arena; as Kingston's literary merit has been established, is it safer to laud her than to do so with 'unknowns?' Such questions hover over the field of Asian American literature, and although I shall not attempt to answer them in this study, they are necessary to acknowledge, for they push me to examine style, to determine why I find a piece of Asian American writing compelling. In order to begin to answer questions of Kingston's dominance in Asian American literary discourse, it is first necessary for each individual scholar to explore his/her own notions of literary value; thus, I will focus here on the works which speak most strongly to me, and attempt to discover why they command such force.

Perhaps I will return to Kingston in the future, but now, in order to understand my primary subjects of discussion--relatively unknown Asian American authors--I must seek to understand critical approaches to the larger body of Asian American literature, separate from its notable exception. Thus, I must remove from discussion the two aforementioned possibilities as to why Asian American literary criticism tends to evade issues of style and quality except in reference to Kingston--that Asian American literary critics may be adopting mainstream views or adapting to gain recognition--and attempt to explain why many Asian American scholars decenter issues of style. Fundamentally, the thematic bent of most Asian American literary critics stems from two main sources: the need to educate the predominantly ignorant mainstream about the cultural, political, and historical

content/context of Asian American writings, without which the literature could not be fully understood or appreciated, and the desire to empower the Asian American community through an analysis of message and identity. Critics have sacrificed methodology and theory for political/cultural understanding, as discussions of technique and style do not seem as immediately empowering as those of oppression and resistance. As ignorance and prejudice against Asian Americans continues to run rampant in the US, the focus for many scholars today is the struggle to assert an Asian American voice, to construct and relate a self-determined Asian American identity. Says Chan, "Regardless of the medium or the genre or the artistic quality of individual pieces, Asian American works of art play a vital role in capturing, reconstructing, and preserving the past" (Chan, Asian Californians 167). Many other Asian American studies scholars share Chan's view, and I can readily acknowledge and appreciate the "vital role" Asian American literature plays in promoting cultural awareness and rewriting history. However, today, in 1994, I believe it is possible to read Asian American literature not only for its social worth but its unique literary value--to also regard medium, genre, and artistic quality as vital elements of the Asian American experience. In the recent past it has been natural and necessary for politics and thematics to supersede methodology and stylistics, but now, "on the brink of an Asian American literary and artistic renaissance" (Ling, "Emerging Canons" 192), there is enough impetus in Asian American literary scholarship to fight for a discourse that not only presents revolutionary perspectives into the *what* of Asian American literature, but the *how* as well.

Today, 'multiculturalism' and 'diversity' have become buzz words in American society's social, political, occupational, and educational arenas. With the Reagan-Bush era came increased poverty, joblessness, illiteracy, and nativism that forced ethnic communities⁶--among the hardest hit by Reaganomics--to vocalize their concerns. Building upon the political activism of the 1960s which mobilized Asian American communities to voice and action, like many other Asian American college students in the '80s, I became involved. As an undergraduate at UC Santa Cruz, I became active in campus and statewide Third World coalitions that marched on California's capitol to demand educational justice, that fought for the creation of ethnic studies positions, that rallied against institutionalized racism. We supported the Japanese American struggle for redress and reparations, United Farmworkers Union boycotts, garment workers' rights, Jesse Jackson's campaigns. All across the country, grassroots student and community organizations strengthened their voices in the fight for change. And our voices were heard, not only in our communities but in electoral politics as well; activism has paved the way for Asian Americans to win government offices. People of color have forced the institutions of this country to take notice. In recent years, Asian Americans' long tradition of "engaging in political action" has finally been recognized (Chan, Asian Americans 171), with our "rising political consciousness" (181) of the '80s.

In addition to the strengthening of our political voice, ethnic studies professor Elaine Kim cites three other factors that have contributed to the increased mainstream recognition of Asian American literature in the '80s: the efforts of the Combined Asian Resources Project which began in the 1970s, which pressed "for the revival and reprinting of Asian American classics...

established an archive of materials...of Asian American actors and writers, organized literature conferences, and breathed life into Asian American theater" (Kim, Foreword xii-xiii); increased immigration to America from Asia after 1965's "changes in US immigration policy" (xiii), making Asian Americans a more visible presence; and "the changing political relationships between such Asian nations as the People's Republic of China, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the Phillipines--relationships that have always reached into the lives of Asian Americans" (xiii), which Kim implies have created new dynamics and growth in Asian American communities as well as international relations where US acknowledgment of the Asian American experience is politically expedient. Though Asian Americans and our literature are incorrectly seen as 'new,' today we *are* more acknowledged than ever before. "The time is ripe, and the majority seems at this moment more and more ready to listen to the *other* and to its own formulations of the *other* as reflected in texts produced by these others" (Ling 194).

It is important to recognize the reason that Asian American novelists, poets, and critics flourish today is *not* because "writers have attained a level of sophistication and maturation never reached before," (194) cites Ling, who has "discovered several highly sophisticated and accomplished writers of the past who were quickly forgotten and neglected." Political activism and conditions have created a climate that has begun to recognize past and present Asian American literary contributions. We can cite with pride literary achievements such as National Book Critics Circle Awards for Maxine Hong Kingston in 1976 and Bharati Mukherjee in 1988, American Book Awards for Hisaye Yamamoto (1988), Frank Chin (1989), and Karen Tei Yamashita (1991), Cathy Song's 1983 winning of the Yale Younger Poets Competition, Garret

Hongo's 1988 Lamont Poetry Award, David Henry Hwang's Tony award for "M. Butterfly" in 1989, and the best-selling acclaim and major motion picture of The Joy Luck Club. Almost every literary anthology published in the late '80s and early '90s incorporates Asian American poetry or prose, and "anthologies of Asian American writing, especially by and/or about women" (Wong 3) have proliferated in recent years. Perhaps too, in the last 10 years, Asian Americans in academia have begun to shed the internalized oppression that has kept us from the arts, as "Asian Americans are producing literature and criticism at a tremendous rate" (Lim, "The Ambivalent American" 21), building a field that is developing not only forward but "historically backwards as scholars uncover and recuperate neglected texts" (Lim and Ling 3). The field of Asian American literature is fast-growing and widely acknowledged in major universities, 18 of which since about 1986 have considered or filled "tenure-track teaching positions for Asian American literary scholars" (Wong 213). We are experiencing an exciting time of growth and recognition even at San Jose State University, whose English department is considered one of the more traditional departments state-wide: authors such as Amy Tan, Jessica Hagedorn, David Mura, and Li-Young Li have given packed-house readings on campus, Asian American literary scholar Shirley Lim was vigorously recruited for a tenure-track position, composition instructors are trained to incorporate a wide variety of readings in their curriculum, including Asian American literature, and the department has just hired a new professor of ethnic American literature.

Despite such a tremendous surge in Asian American literary accomplishment, I maintain the argument that critical focus as a whole still tends to downplay stylistic issues. In critic King-Kok Cheung's words, "the

formal and figurative aspects of Asian American literature have been relatively neglected in recent criticism" (14). To illustrate, I draw upon recent book-length works by the top scholars in the field: Reading the Literatures of Asian America (1992), edited by Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Amy Ling, and Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance (1993), by Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong. In pioneer scholar Elaine Kim's foreword to Reading the Literatures, no mention is made of style or form; rather her discussion focuses on shifting politics and constructs of identity. In their own introduction to the anthology, editors Lim and Ling emphasize the "historical and cultural contexts [which] problematize the notion of an Asian American canon" (3) in their desire "to illustrate the range of Asian American literary texts, their diverse subtexts, the formation of traditions, the evolution of canonical criteria, and the proliferation of commentary on all of these" (6). I do not wish to slight either the anthology or its goals, which are both urgent and scholarly; I merely wish to point out that questions of style are not central. Reading the Literature is thematically divided by sections titled "Ambivalent Identities," "Race and Gender," "Borders and Boundaries," and "Representations and Self-Representations"--all packed with close readings and insightful analyses which invariably touch upon literary or poetic technique. However, readers who seek enlightenment regarding the styles used and created by Asian American writers must piece together the snippets for themselves as technical observations are the background rather than the foreground of the discussion.

Sau-Ling Wong in Reading Asian American Literature reveals a similar leaning: she introduces her study with the straightforward comment: "This book is a thematic study of Asian American literature" (3). She further

states that her "chosen terms of analysis, because of their bias toward 'content,' do not leave much room for investigating possible tensions between the thematic import and stylistic inflections of a work...formalist observations are typically incidental or subordinate to the thematic argument" (14). Rather, Wong focuses on illuminating an Asian American literary tradition through intertextual analysis, exploring "the myriad ways in which texts grouped under the Asian American rubric build upon, allude to, refine, controvert, and resonate with each other" (12) in a work that is at once provocative and revolutionary in its thematic discussions of food, the Doppelganger figure, mobility, and play. Wong has made a choice to disregard stylistics--a choice made consciously. But that she acknowledges her lack of emphasis on formal discussion actually opens doors to future study of Asian American literary style, rather than rejecting it with silence. In gaining through Wong's text an illumination of the common themes and motifs shared among many Asian American writers, we are implicitly inspired to seek an intertextual understanding of the styles Asian American literature employs, modifies, and creates.

Wong seeks to "contribute to a sense of an Asian American literary tradition," by demonstrating how "Asian American deployments of the motif, when contextualized and read intertextually, form distinctive patterns" (12). I also seek an understanding of the Asian American literary tradition, but one based on stylistic strategy. Fortunately, I am not alone in my search: In her 1993 book, Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa, King-Kok Cheung takes a significant step toward forging such an intertextual understanding of Asian American literary patterns with a work that sees silence as a key stylistic element in Asian

American writings. Cheung writes in her introduction that "to read [Asian American literature] as purely mimetic beclouds the author's artistry" (13). Rather than a discussion based on sociohistorical context with peripheral attention to style, Cheung attempts the opposite--"she weav[es] historical and cultural background into [her] textual analysis...[since] while historical and cultural elements are everywhere discernible, each [writer] exhibits singular vision and invention" (14). Cheung's primary goal is to "unsettle the Eurocentric perspective on speech and silence," in such a manner that "reconcil[e]s historicism and formalism by uncovering both the heritage and the individual talent of ethnic writers" (23).

Cheung offers an Asian American conceptualization of silence that is "at once a pervasive theme and a rhetorical strategy" (16) in the works of Yamamoto, Kingston, and Kogawa. Silence is strategy as the three writers

articulate--question, report, expose--the silence imposed on themselves and their peoples...at the same time, they reveal, through their own manners of telling and through their characters, that silences--textual ellipses, nonverbal gestures, authorial hesitations--can also be articulate (3-4).

For Cheung, silence, oxymoronicly, can reveal expression, voice, and noise through the strategies of the writers who "interweave speech and silence, narration and ellipses, autobiography and fiction" (19). The oxymoronic 'loud' silences of the three Asian American women writers reflect their experiences in America, where silence is seen as passive and weak rather than a source of strength as in their Asian cultures, and where in America for Asian women, voice can be liberating. Though Cheung does not necessarily aspire to illuminate an Asian American literary tradition through intertextual analysis like Wong, her separate discussions of three writers' oxymoronic strategies resonate within each other and within Asian

American women's experiences, helping us to better comprehend each work and Asian American literature as a whole.

Even without express intent, Cheung's book reveals how "A particular poem can be understood only by someone who understands its conventions...[how] these conventions must be learned by studying similar poems, and [how] a reading of each of these requires in turn a knowledge of conventions" (268). Here Donald Keesey describes the stance of intertextual critics, whose perspective "says that the poem can best be understood by seeing it in the larger contexts of the linguistic and literary conventions it employs" (257)--conventions such as "meter, rhythm, and rhyme...structure and plot, techniques of character representation, and a vast reservoir of images and symbols" (262). Cheung lays a foundation for intertextual analysis by identifying silence as a key thematic and stylistic convention of Asian American literature; she rejects established notions of silence to pinpoint a context and strategy uniquely Asian American. It is the task of future scholarship to identify further Asian American literary conventions, to create a broader intertextual context with which we can understand Asian American literary style as well as theme. Thus, my desire is to follow Cheung's path and identify one key element of Asian American literary style, one which may possibly reverberate throughout Asian American literature. I seek also to add to Cheung's discourse on "articulate silences" with other Asian American writers who employ a similar strategy. As Wong's "intertextual investigation...extract[s] common imagery to formulate an Asian American tradition" (17), my goal is to build upon Cheung's work by extracting commonalities in style. Through furthering Cheung and Wong's scholarship, I join two powerful Asian American women critics of Asian

American literature in forging a "self-defined, or an internally defined, notion of tradition" (Gates 166).

The artists who will be the subjects of my discussion have chosen themselves for me. Logic suggests that I should choose two Asian American writers of the same nationality, yet I do not. Logic also asserts that I should choose two artists who write within the same genre, yet I do not. And the logic of Elaine Kim advises me to choose "more skillful" writers, yet again, I do not. Not in defiance of logic but with personal passion do I choose to examine the works of Japanese American poet Janice Mirikitani and Korean American novelist Ronyoung Kim. Despite their differences in form and cultural context, their writings are connected in the realm of my experience. And despite Kim's belief that they "aren't particularly skilled," their words have captured me with their power.

I am a second-generation Asian American woman. My mother, born of an upper-class Korean family, never anticipated that life in America would bring hard labor and economic hardship. Nor did she expect her American-born daughter to face racism and discrimination; after all, her father was American. But by the shape of my eyes and color of my skin, I have been labeled as a foreigner since childhood. Growing up in parts of America where ours was the only Asian American family, I became accustomed to such questions as 'What country are you from?' 'What are you?' 'Where's Korea?' and labels such as 'gook,' 'jap,' and 'ching-chong chinaman.' When I was 14 we moved to California--but the insults didn't end. 'Go back to your own country where you belong! I'm sick of ya goddamn orientals!' raged a white man in a pickup truck as I walked across a Safeway parking lot. Then, when I told my mother about the incident, her first words were "Why did he pick

you?" She didn't understand how illogically American racism operates until she entered the public workforce when my father could no longer support the family. Neither did I comprehend the workings of racism until at UC Santa Cruz, I learned that I wasn't the only one to be stereotyped and attacked for being Asian. Through sharing stories with other Asian Americans, talking and writing my experiences, I became aware. As dialogue continued, I read, wrote, talked, and listened. I became angry.

Through my anger I became active in the Asian American community. I channeled my rage at our spiritual, educational, and economic degradation into the struggle for awareness and self-determination for all people of color. I uncovered my Korean heritage, fighting cultural oppression with pride. For the first time, I belonged to a Korean American community outside my family. For the first time, I *belonged*. Mirikitani drew me not only with her anger in expressing the unique torture faced by Asian American women but with her commitment to change, with her revolutionary, community spirit. Kim spoke to my heritage as a Korean American⁷, to my mother's struggles and pain and the unique joys Korean Americans share. Other writers of color captured attention, but it is to Mirikitani and Kim that I kept returning, over and over again.

Writing this thesis pushes me to seek out the literary reasons why I re-read Mirikitani and Kim again and again rather than the myriad of other Asian American authors who have surfaced with similar cultural themes and political messages. Is it their styles that pull me? Holman and Harmon define style as something which "combines two elements: the idea to be expressed and the individuality of the author" (460). Thus, the uniqueness of the authors in their methods of expression constitutes style; yet, how they

write is ultimately linked to who they are and what they have to say. It would be unconscionable for me to conceive of style as separate from the passions of the writers: I must, like King-Kok Cheung, find how the two intertwine to produce a vibrant whole.

I hope to provide an understanding of each writer that begins with a blatantly personal perspective. I want the reader to see through my eyes the strengths of each writer, why she is both skillful and valuable to an Asian American woman student activist such as myself. My chapter on Mirikitani will begin with a personal profile which intertwines the poet's experiences with my own, to show how Mirikitani's work is powerful and important in the urgent context of Asian American student activism and political empowerment through organizing and writing. My chapter on Kim will begin with an analysis of the family in Clay Walls interwoven with my own family experiences, to show how Kim's work hits strongly upon Korean American gender and cultural dynamics. These first sections of each chapter lay the two burning halves of my identity at the reader's feet: my desire for justice as an Asian American activist and my desire for peace in a struggling Korean American family. I write from no ivory tower, but bare elements of my soul in a fashion that I hope will bring a measure of enlightenment to both Asian Americans with no literary background and literature enthusiasts with no Asian American studies background. Gloria Hull was right to stress the importance of style, but wrong to de-stress issues of sociopolitical context: I feel that both are necessary and interconnected.

Each of the next two chapters is designed to stand alone, to create a space for further scholarship on Mirikitani and Kim, as well as to allow room for future chapters on additional Asian American writers. Though only two

authors are discussed, I hope my efforts to discuss style, following my personal contextualizations of Asian American activism and family, will contribute to the understanding of an Asian American literary tradition initiated by King-Kok Cheung and Sau-ling Wong. Wong deploys "intertextual investigation" (17) to show how Asian American works form a tradition based on shared themes; Cheung shows thematic and stylistic resonances among three Asian American women writers in their use of "articulate silences." I wish to discuss how Mirikitani and Kim also use vocal, multi-layered silences as oxymoronic strategy in the vein of Cheung's scholarship; I also wish to begin an intertextual investigation like Wong's, but to search not for common themes but for shared stylistic strategies and the social contexts they reflect.

Through my examination of Shedding Silence and Clay Walls, I became aware of how each writer depicts silences that seem to scream. When a character is 'quiet,' her verbal silence is played against intense non-verbal physical or emotional expression. The women protagonists, like the characters Cheung explores in Articulate Silences, defy stereotypes of silence as passive and weak through body language, actions, or limited speech, which, in their traditional Asian cultures, shriek with power and pain. Like Cheung describes, Mirikitani and Kim's "art of silence...[employs] various strategies of reticence...irony, hedging, coded language, muted plots" (14). With dominant plots and muted sub-plots, coded language of reticence which cannot fully mask intense emotion, and oxymoronicly articulate silences which reveal a wealth of expression, Mirikitani and Kim's works reflect the contradictions and dualities in Asian American women's lives. Their shared strategies, as Cheung points out in the cases of Kingston, Kogawa, and

Yamamoto, "include the juxtaposition of...perspectives [as well as of] the journalistic and the poetic, of 'memory' and 'counter memory'" (19). Cheung also refers to juxtaposition when she cites how the writers interweave "speech and silence, narration and ellipses, autobiography and fiction" (19). Juxtaposition, thus, is a primary means of conveying the oxymoronic 'loud' silences of Mirikitani and Kim who set silence against expression, who play conflicting perspectives and images against each other. They use juxtaposition not only as a strategy to convey articulate silences but to express the inherent contradictions in the term 'Asian American'--the simultaneous desires to adapt to a new society yet maintain ethnic heritage, to keep faith in the 'American dream' yet battle discrimination. Juxtaposition as a stylistic strategy encompasses oxymoronic silences, unveiling other contradictions Mirikitani and Kim express as well. Thus, I choose juxtaposition as my primary term, the key stylistic strategy of Asian American literature I explore in this thesis, with oxymoronic silences as an integral feature. Mirikitani's poetry juxtaposes contrasting images, perspectives, and tones in the conflict between thought and action, tradition and adaptation, speech and silence. Kim, too, juxtaposes silence with speech, with contrasting language, perspectives, and imagery that reveals not only loud silences but the paradox of being a Korean American: of being an 'American' with no rights as an American, of being 'American' as well as 'Korean.'

To see juxtaposition as an Asian American literary convention of intertextuality, it is necessary to first touch upon 'paradox.' Cleanth Brooks in The Well-Wrought Urn describes poetry as "'words perpetually juxtaposed in new and sudden combinations'" (9). His primary argument is that paradox is "the inevitable instrument" (11) of poetry, and he uses the term

'juxtaposition' to signify a poetic action that has resulted in paradox. Though the term paradox is more recognizable in the literary field than juxtaposition, I shall use 'juxtaposition' for its wieldiness--its ability to take on verb form. It also helps me to maintain a small distance from the paradoxes of mainstream canonized writers such as Donne, Milton, Pope, with literary terminology less-used and thus more freshly adaptable to the Asian American experience. Perhaps when my discussions of Mirikitani and Kim are completed in this thesis, I may be moved to explore other Asian American writers in a similar vein, which may in turn lead me to investigate comparisons between Asian American and traditional English/American writers' use of paradox. Here, however, I focus my attention solely on Mirikitani and Kim, predominantly utilizing the term 'juxtaposition,' although paradox, as the "language of poetry," is the ground upon which my discussion stands. Paradox arises as both thematic and stylistic device in Mirikitani's poetry, whose power lies in the juxtaposition of contrasting images, and in Kim's novel, where the paradox of the Korean American experience is made poignant through the juxtaposition of language, image, and narrative voice. So many other Asian American writers also employ techniques of juxtaposition that our literature as a whole is seen by historians as "giving form to the paradoxes faced by Asian Americans" (Chan, Asian Americans 185). Though at this time I postpone deeper study inclusive of more Asian American artists, my thesis examining the strategy of juxtaposition in the works of Mirikitani and Kim take a necessary step toward the illumination of an Asian American literary tradition.

Janice Mirikitani: *Shedding Silence*

Her voice is low, resonant, powerful. Large eyes shine dark with fury, memory, tears. Masses of thick hair frame a face intense with lines of passion, strength, regret. Janice Mirikitani is beautiful.

Imprisoned as a baby in WWII's Japanese American internment camps with her parents, Mirikitani's life is a legacy of racism and the struggle to survive--to forge a world of beauty and hope to heal the suffering within and around her. Through poetry, she has voiced the anger of millions, the crushed joys, brutal degradations, frustration. Through poetry, she has given life to dreams, dignity to the oppressed, pride to those whose souls have all but died.

She heals not only with words on paper but with her everyday voice--lending support and guidance to the hungry, the addicts, the alcoholics, the abused; to those misunderstood, denied, caged in walls without creativity, expression, life. Her work as program director for Glide Church and Urban Center sustains her. Her poetry sustains us.

In the midst of a Third World coalition at UC Santa Cruz, I learned about Janice Mirikitani. In the midst of a Third World coalition at San Francisco State, she learned about herself. She'd been working toward her Master's degree in creative writing during the 1960s. In the 1980s I was working on my bachelor's degree in literature (the creative writing program rejected me). For Mirikitani, self-hatred evolved to an anger against whites to a broader fury at systematic oppression. I, too, as well as countless people of color, experienced the transition from internalized oppression to anti-white

backlash to a broader understanding of how imperialism and capitalism have dehumanized people of color.

After four years in desert camps, Japanese Americans like Mirikitani's parents were threatened not to associate with other Japanese, to quietly blend into American society and hide their foreignness or face the humiliation of incarceration again. Thus, sansei (third-generation Japanese Americans) like Mirikitani were raised speaking English only and stripped of cultural knowledge and pride: "I didn't want to be Japanese. I felt inferior. I thought I was ugly. I hated the shape of my eyes and the color of my skin" (Liu and Poma 16).

After growing up in middle America, having never seen Asian Americans who weren't my relatives, I believed that I was beady-eyed and funny looking and could never fit in. Following my rejection from the creative writing program at UCSC, I was told by a junior creative writing student that the reason I was denied was because "Asians can't write, and the ones who try are imitating European writers anyway. That's why there are no Asians in the major." He had never read Janice Mirikitani.

Neither had I, until I became active in the Asian American community at UCSC. Too many times I had been asked what country I was from, called a 'gook' or 'goddamned Oriental', or told that I 'looked' like a straight A student. I was driven to seek other Asian students and to try to understand and act against racism. Through writing about my experiences, I became involved in my community as the multicultural editor of the campus paper (City on a Hill Press) and an editor of our Asian American literary anthology. Inevitably, Mirikitani's poetry and contributions to Third World literature entered my awareness.

As the '60s Third World strikes swept SFSU, Mirikitani was flung into a "blood and guts reality of political issues" (Interview, Dec. 1991) and "became involved with the Asian American Political Alliance, helping form the first Asian American magazine on the West Coast" (Liu and Poma 16). A fervent desire to celebrate being Japanese American replaced self-loathing as well as a hatred of whites: "I became anti-white because of the years of suppressed anger I felt against feeling put-down as an Asian. 'They' became the ones who put us in the camps" (Liu and Poma 9). Despite what Mirikitani has deemed an emotional overreaction--a stage most people of color experience--she channeled her energies into strengthening her community, a life-long effort which has led her to the perception that her conflicts are "more clearly with systems which dehumanize people, and institutional racism which we must continue to struggle against--rather than individuals or the 'white race'" (Liu and Poma 9).

Through writing, Mirikitani has sought to empower herself and her people. She began writing before she developed a Third World consciousness, but felt that what she produced had no soul.

In college I wrote narcissistic, white-influenced, navel-gaping, self-centered poetry which was imitative, derivational copying of contemporary writers of the time. I was turned on to existentialism and concrete imagism/objectivism, but I was using it in a detached, soulless way because I didn't know who I was (Interview, Dec. 1991).

Formal training left Mirikitani with the tools to write but no "heart or guts" to write from. She credits white writers such as Robert Frost and William Carlos Williams, whom she was forced to study in English courses, for teaching her technical aspects of poetry, but "it was like looking in a blank

mirror...nothing spoke to my soul until Carlos Bulosan, Toshio Mori, Hisaye Yamamoto" (Interview, Dec. 1991).

Anti-war protests and the Third World Strikes exposed Mirikitani not only to a new consciousness of self but a new consciousness of writing. Out of the history of cultural and economic oppression she shared, Mirikitani finally felt she could truly create. She and other writers of color such as Roberto Vargas, Ntozake Shange, David Henderson, and Maya Angelou began poetry groups, from which grew Mirikitani's poetic power and the San Francisco collective, Third World Communications. Members of the collective worked together to raise money for their books through benefits, readings, and musicals, and produced anthologies such as Third World Women (1972) and Time to Greez! Incantations from the Third World (1975), which Mirikitani co-edited and published her poetry within. "She found this period of her life exhilarating...

'We were connected by our struggles, which had so many common threads, chains. What was especially exciting was the new relationships created with other women writers of color--Black, Hispanic, Pilipino, Chinese, Japanese, Native American, Puerto Rican women. We were discovering new power' (Liu and Poma 15).

From the power of Mirikitani's poetry and vision expressed in the anthologies she helped birth, UCSC's Asian American, African American, Native American, and Mexican American students gained inspiration to rejuvenate TWANAS (Third World and Native American Students), an independent magazine of our essays, news articles, prose, poetry, photography, and artwork. It's not that Mirikitani was the only writer or force to urge students into productivity, but she had a definite influence. From my work at City on a Hill, I'd been able to share her poetry with the

community. When Mirikitani came to campus, she did a much better job, with her intense, throaty voice in a packed, excited roomful of students of color. For many like myself, she became a role model, a source of strength. We wanted to continue in the rich tradition of Asian American writing she helped vitalize for our generation, and did so through our own magazines and anthologies.

Mirikitani's creative drive and ardent passion for expression and justice were not just a passing phase of the '60s and '70s. Her continuous stream of work continues to have the relevance and power to affect the lives of students/writers/activists. In 1980, Mirikitani spearheaded the production of Ayumi: A Japanese American Anthology, which spans four generations of writers--Issei, Nisei, Sansei, Yonsei--and "has been hailed as a Japanese American bilingual triumph for co-editor and project director Mirikitani" (Liu and Poma 15) as well as a "bold challenge to the institutional racism of mainstream publishing [and] a lasting contribution to the multicultural literature of this country" (Oyama 250). In 1989, she co-edited the groundbreaking Making Waves: An Anthology of Writing by and about Asian American Women--the first compilation of its kind. Her poetry has appeared in numerous other creative anthologies, including The Third Woman: Minority Women Writers of the United States (1980), Women Poets of the World (1983), Breaking Silence: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Poets (1983), The Hawk's Well: A Collection of Japanese American Art and Literature (1986) and Making Face, Making Soul (1990). In her continuing philosophy that anthologies are "the best way for a number of voices in the community to be heard" (Liu and Poma 15), Mirikitani is currently developing a new anthology that deals with incest and sexual abuse.

For the efforts she has made toward community empowerment through her writing, she has received awards from the Women's Foundation and Pacific Asian American Women Bay Area Coalition and has been invited to read at fund-raisers with other inspirational women of color poets like June Jordan. Mirikitani's name is one that evokes respect and pride in the Asian American and Third World communities, for she has endured our struggles and given them voice.

With decades of contributions to literature, it is unfortunate that Mirikitani's books of poetry, Awake in the River (1978) and Shedding Silence (1987), have received so little critical attention. Although we are experiencing "the start of a golden age of Asian American cultural production" (Kim, Foreword xi), barriers of racism and ignorance still exist to prevent Asian American literature from being fully acknowledged and appreciated. Shirley Lim states from experience that Asian American scholars such as herself "find that their work is even further marginalized because of...lack of access and opportunity to publish" ("The Ambivalent American" 15). Thus, Mirikitani's critical neglect may stem not only from being overlooked by a mainstream which has not yet awakened to a full appreciation of Asian American literature, but also from a shortage of opportunities for Asian American scholars to express their literary points-of-view. Not only is Mirikitani one of the most widely anthologized Asian American poets, but one of the most frequently mentioned and quoted in history books, classrooms, and journals. Asian Americans have recognized and appreciated her writing, yet for some reason have not published significant critical works on her poetry, whether it be from lack of opportunity or lack of scholarly interest. The mainstream, too, has been exposed to Mirikitani's poetry, but

for some reason has largely ignored it. Perhaps today more critical attention is given to such Asian American poets as Marilyn Chin and Li-Young Li who have published more recently, given that Asian American literature has gained greater popular acclaim in the 1990s. Though Richard Oyama contributes a valuable perspective on Mirikitani's critical marginalization in a Japanese American-specific light, his rationale does not do justice to the complexity of the issue. He remarks that

In this country, Japanese American poetry has gained little critical recognition or acceptance into the American canon...with the exception of Lawson Fusao Inada, no Japanese American poets have had books published by a major publishing house...though a literary tradition has long existed in our community (249-50).

His comments about the difficulties Japanese American poets face in trying to publish ring true, and clearly, Mirikitani's is not the only Japanese American work to be overlooked in the context of a largely conservative American literary arena; however, Oyama ignores the fact that Asian American critics have also played their part in neglecting Japanese American writers like Mirikitani. No scholarly essay, Asian American or otherwise, makes Mirikitani its sole focus, and Asian American publications chose to make her life--rather than her poetry--their primary subject. While only three literary critics discuss her work in any depth in brief sections of articles, the majority of Asian American scholars dismiss Mirikitani as more activist than poet.

The first and only volume of Asian American literary criticism, Reading the Literatures of Asian America (1992), in its focus on prose, does not include Mirikitani's poetry as a primary subject of study. Though the editors, Shirley Lim and Amy Ling, two of the most productive and insightful scholars in the Asian American literary community, de-emphasize poetry in

general, I consider their exclusion of Mirikitani's poetry an unfortunate oversight. Only once is Mirikitani even mentioned, and in what I feel a shallow, uninformed, and denigrating manner. George Uba labels Mirikitani an "activist" poet in his article, "Versions of Identity in Post-Activist Asian American Poetry," titled to privilege the literary stance of "post-activist" poets over writers like Mirikitani. To him, "post activist" poets like David Mura, John Yao, and Marilyn Chin destabilize identity as problematic while poets like Mirikitani simplistically ascribe themselves to a homogeneous communalism. Uba asserts that post-60s and 70s poets have "depth, range, and sophistication" (47), implying that Mirikitani lacks such qualities, as she "relies heavily on political slogans and the rhetoric of abstraction" and the "linguistic shock tactics" common to 'activist' poetry (34). It is difficult for me to believe that Uba has deeply read her work: She does *not* use mere slogans and her poetry's images are striking, original, and vivid. Though Mirikitani's work is based heavily on community and kinship, never in her poetry is identity easy or fixed; rather, it is a hard-fought internal and external struggle that must adapt to the constantly shifting political climate that invades and shapes our lives. For many Asian American readers, Mirikitani's work holds an enduring power and strength--not only on the basis of her political themes but her craftsmanship. For me, her poems have the power to bring rage, tears, or pain, re-reading after re-reading, sharply impacting my emotions no matter where I am situated in time, place, or identity.

Mirikitani is not just a 'street' poet, a 'protest' poet, a 'Third World' poet, a 'political' poet, or an 'activist' poet, as she is commonly labeled by critics like Uba and even Oyama, who discusses her poetry in Ayumi only

fleetingly as "among the most political in the anthology" (254). Although such terms may acknowledge some of her themes, they discredit her as a poet, a writer, a skilled artist. Patricia Holt of the San Francisco Examiner describes Mirikitani in Shedding Silence as a "visual, direct, rhythmic, dramatic artist whose poetry is far more complicated than it seems" with its images of pain and destruction set against the foundation of her poems, which is of "transcendence, growth, and inner peace" (6). Showing similar appreciation, critic John Crawford analyzes Mirikitani's juxtaposition of conflicting images in Awake in the River in "Notes Toward a New Multicultural Criticism: Three Works by Women of Color" (1987). Crawford has designated more critical space to Mirikitani's poetry than any other scholar with "Notes" and his subsequent Amerasia Journal review (1988) of Shedding Silence, where he briefly examines her use of time and form. He points out that

it's not enough to say that Mirikitani's political 'message' is still relevant today. That would make her work useful but would not account for...its appeal...She is, in fact, an artist of the kind of terror and promise which she depicts. Her method lies in the use of her favorite metaphorical implement--the fish knife. Her work should challenge the canons of 'pure' art, of the 'universal,' disfiguring and reshaping those realms (168).

Implicit in Crawford's comments is the urge for further criticism of Mirikitani that delves into the poetry as well as the activism; until now, Crawford's call has received no response. To answer, I attempt a reading of Shedding Silence that seeks to do justice to her poetic power.

Though Mirikitani's work has not been treated deeply in scholarship, critics such as the aforementioned Shirley Lim and John Crawford, as well King-Kok Cheung, have laid a solid foundation for my analysis. In "Reconstructing Asian American Poetry: A Case for

Ethnopoetics," Lim describes Mirikitani's preceding Awake in the River as a book whose

dominant tone of feminist and social protest...would appear to take it very much into the mainstream of articulate, committed writing. There is little of the stereotypes of passive, decorative, formal qualities associated with Japanese women in her poems. But everything in her book, even the movements of dissent, of liberation, and of raw honesty, are subordinated to an ethnic perspective. It is a perspective which is clearly American-based but which does not lose sight of its Japanese sources, its history in WWII relocation camp suffering and its local strength in family and community (Lim, "Reconstructing" 54).

Mirikitani's latest volume, Shedding Silence, also reveals a tone of outrage similar to that which Lim describes, yet retains Japanese cultural responses to racism, hardship, and suffering. While anger and rebellion may seem to be American characteristics, they are expressed in such a way by Mirikitani's characters that their responses are still culturally Japanese. Through juxtaposition, Mirikitani creates an artistic and thematic fusion of Japanese and American that Mirikitani which is an inevitable source of paradox: violent discord arises within her characters as they crave justice yet act unjustly, as they are forced by tradition to act untraditionally, as they nurture silences that speak louder than screams. Such paradoxical discord defines the Asian American experience more than any peace or harmony, shaped by the contradictions between 'Asian' and 'American.' Discord and contradiction, thus, is the nature of Mirikitani's poetry, a place where the elements of our struggles unite and take shape to help forge an Asian American identity, which in today's society is necessarily problematic and paradoxical.

To understand such paradox in Mirikitani's poetry, Lim argues for the inclusion of critical skills beyond those IA Richards delineates in Practical

Criticism. A scholar accountable to the nuances and necessities of Asian American poetry must possess the following:

a specific sensibility trained to understand and appreciate [1] the surface stylistic features of folkloristic and local effects; [2] a linguistic knowledge of the original language of the poet necessary to apprehend the author's intentions; [3] and an informed socio-cultural approach which counteracts the privileging of the dominant culture (Lim, "Reconstructing" 59).

Lim specifically addresses those mainstream scholars who have blundered in their attempts to assess or even comprehend Asian American poetry. Her steps toward poetic analysis shall not be the foreground of my analysis, but rather an underlying background. I wish to delve more deeply into Mirikitani's poetry than the discussion of surface images and translations Lim suggests, which to me as an Asian American studies student seems too readily available, especially as an appendix of Japanese words is provided in Shedding Silence. Through my understanding of Mirikitani's life and experience as an Asian American woman, I hope that the necessary "informed socio-cultural approach" (59) will come naturally to my interpretations of her poems.

While Lim's perspective is perhaps a hidden root guiding my analysis, Crawford's in "Notes" is a visible branch. His exploration of the juxtapositions in Awake in the River more directly hits upon the source of Mirikitani's power in choice of subject and poetic technique. Her themes of social protest are revealed through the contrast between the white world and the Japanese American world of her experience--"between wealth and poverty, control and oppression, owners and outcasts" (Crawford 184). She brings the injustice and pain of WWII relocation to life by juxtaposing images of Japanese Americans trying to forget the past with the description of a

woman mad with the enduring humiliation and torture of the camps (186). Generational conflicts are given poignancy with Mirikitani's interplay of her mother's songs and her own (189), while the memories of Hiroshima are made even more terrible by "the official hypocrisies surrounding it" (185) in her poems. To Crawford, "perhaps the most remarkable juxtapositions of all have to do with lovemaking, juxtaposed against the brutalities of white America intent on war, murder, and atrocity against people of color" (189) in poems like "Jungle Rot and Open Arms." Yet another use of juxtaposition in Mirikitani's poetry "comes where the poet encounters white racist stereotypes. The racist speaker is played off against the judgment inherent in the poem, whether the poet actually responds or not" (187). Crawford's analysis of juxtaposition as poetic technique reveals a primary facet of Mirikitani's skill in manipulating words and images, counteracting those who would dismiss Mirikitani as a mere shock-tactician, and has lent me a method of recognizing Shedding Silence's strongest poems.

A study of Mirikitani's juxtapositions falls hand in hand with an understanding of her controlling theme of breaking silence, as in her poetry, verbal silence is set against actions which speak more loudly than words. King-Kok Cheung, in her recent book analyzing the Articulate Silences of Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Joy Kogawa, briefly refers to Shedding Silence as "attest[ing] to the prevailing impulse to forswear silence" (7n). However, Mirikitani's poetry does more than merely disavow silence; if Cheung would have applied her analysis of Yamamoto, Kingston, and Kogawa's silences to Mirikitani's poetry, she more than likely would have recognized that in Shedding Silence, an "awareness of the difficulty of utterance...[and an] ability to render the voiceless audible" (26) also exists. The

works Cheung discusses "reveal the multiple problems of speechlessness and stress the importance of breaking silence...[and] also challenge blanket endorsements of speech and reductive perspectives on silence...and speak to the resources as well as the hazards of silence" (3). Similarly, Mirikitani lauds shedding imposed silences, yet she does not condemn silence as necessarily weak or negative as does the "feminist antipathy toward silence [which] may run roughshod over the sensibilities of some ethnic groups" (Cheung 6) or the Western judgment of Asian American silence which patronizingly deems us inscrutable, exotic, submissive, and obedient (Cheung 2). Since to the Japanese, speech is not *the* means of communication but rather "*a* means of communication" (Cheung 8), the silent characters in Mirikitani's poetry cannot be construed as merely passive--in fact those without voice are often those with the greatest strength. We can learn from Shedding Silence that oxymoronically, "silence can also be articulation" (21) through multiple layers of speech and speechlessness. With an awareness of Mirikitani's resonances within Cheung's study of articulate silences, and using the means of analysis introduced by Crawford, an examination of silence and juxtaposition in Mirikitani's poetry follows.

The opening poem in Shedding Silence, "Without Tongue," hurls the reader into juxtaposed and conflicting images of nature and violence, passivity and action. The violent image of a woman's thighs clawed open is described "like the wide branches of stone pine" (line 5), revealing the calm with which she has turned herself to rock and succumbed to 'nature.' Though Mirikitani tells us that "She lay, passive, as always. Breathless. Without tongue" (6), her telling is deceptive. Silently, the woman rebels against incestuous abuse by slicing off her tongue in a "meadow / shaded

with hawthorne, oak, white birch" (9-10). A gut-piercing sense of horror is achieved through violence juxtaposed with the beauty of nature and through the woman's act of preparing tea as usual after maiming herself. With such conflicting images, Mirikitani shows us how an act of self-mutilation is an easier experience than repeated rape--an act which though verbally silent is neither passive nor weak but one of horrible strength and noise. The woman in the poem "had buried the knife, / afraid she would use it to kill her father" (11-12)--her will not to murder incredibly strong, her humanity incredibly undestroyed. Though she is speechless--"without tongue"--we shrivel beneath her voice.

In "The Lovers," silence is a piercing scream of thought. A man comes in from the field and says nothing to his wife who speechlessly prepares and serves his food. Her unspoken words tell him:

I will start with your
 hands,
 and slowly
 with the sickle
 slice the folds
 of each finger
 so blood will
 form patterns
 like the scales of fish.
 Then I will hold the slivers
 of flesh
 and peel them slowly
 as we do the skin
 of ripe plums
 until your eyes
 widen with the pain

until the bone
appears like hope. (28-45)

The wife's hatred is deepened by her non-verbal words and soothing tone with which she expresses a torture that seems so calm, so planned, so rehearsed. That her thoughts are unspoken rather than shouted in anger intensifies her emotions to deafening proportions. And that images of severe mutilation are juxtaposed with the beauty of patterned fish scales and ripe plums brands this woman's agony in our minds. She wants to carve her husband's face open so he will see her "for the first time" (59), and make him listen as she whispers to the rhythm of his blood (60-62). To whisper rather than scream of a soul-sucking marriage does not indicate passivity or silence but rather a life that has internalized suffering, gathered hatred, and in doing so, survived.

In turn, her husband responds. Our referential field has shifted, and we are now inside his mind. In juxtaposing speaker positions, Mirikitani has created a wordless dialogue of intense images. By knowing the husband's thoughts, the wife's feelings are rendered audible--they are no longer hidden. He tells her that his indifference toward her has stemmed from "your silent / making / your suffocating / servitude" (94-97)--that "Silence has been my defense / of your woman masterhood" (84-85). Here, a battle of silence rages between man and wife. They communicate through silence--their resentment, hatred, and suffering undisguised. Interestingly in the poem, trees are the husband's only friends, his strong body and farming tools his source of comfort and life. He retreats to the calm and quiet of nature, as though his life at home is full of unwelcome, head-splitting noise. His silence and his solace give us not only revised notions of communication and

conflict but a cultural context for interpretation, through Mirikitani's strategy of "verbal withholding or indirection" (Cheung 5).

We know that the husband is an Issei, one of the first-generation Japanese immigrants to America, forced to carve out a living from the land in silence against racism. He has been relegated to plantations, driven into migrant labor, denied access into white occupations, education, towns. He worked until his hands bled, worked until he could buy the dry, rocky land no white man wanted and turn it fertile with the strength of his neck on the plow. He came to America alone, with no family, no wife, until he exchanged photographs and letters with a young woman in Japan who finally agreed to join him in marriage, lured by land and the promise of a better life. When she saw him, he was much older than his pictures, his hands much rougher than she imagined, his land poorer, his life more meager with nothing to offer but a life of farm labor. She found no joy in the trees, no joy in him. She performed her duties without words, without passion, without escape. He retreated into himself, unloved, his hopes for someone to share his life and build a future with destroyed. This man, this woman--they are "The Lovers."

She has mastered him by rejecting him, unable to feel. Her silence has suffocated him, her obedient scorn emasculated him. His only defense is his own silence, but he cannot quiet his emotions. With the plow he cherishes, he wishes to "run the blade / first up the sides / of your thighs / until your blood / has grained the wood" (104-108)... "like the shaft of wheat / slipping to the threshing floor" (100-103). The plow, the wheat, are the beauty in his life, which Mirikitani juxtaposes with the shredding of flesh and the spilling of blood, creating deeper horror from such starkly contrasting images. Silence in

this poem is not employed passively, but rather as a weapon of hatred, frustration, despair. When two people fight with such a weapon, the battle becomes thicker than words.

Mirikitani's silent struggle against oppression in "Graciella" and "Jade" forges poems sharp as knives. We see Graciella working in the fields, beautiful--"her hands like a weaver, threading the dirt / to a rich, dark rug / until the sun fell / behind the elm" (18-22). We hear her boss--"best damned worker / I ever had, / as good as a dozen wetbacks / even with the kid / strapped / to her back he said, pleased" (23-28). We do not hear Mirikitani's voice as we watch Graciella give birth and continue to work, as we listen to the field-owner praise her labor. The poet makes no comment as the pesticides "sprayed from the cropduster / into her blood...ran through her child / who died writhing like a hooked worm" (45-48). Instead, Mirikitani ends the poem by merely observing Graciella's boss dock her pay and offer no burial for her child. Her judgment, though not stated, is clear through the alternating views of Graciella and her boss. The contrast between Graciella's beauty, labor, and tragedy to which the land-owner is oblivious in his quest for profit makes him obscene, beneath hatred. Mirikitani doesn't have to tell us.

In "Jade," Mirikitani responds to a woman who "insisted / my name must be Jade. / Your name's not Jade? / Well it should be. / It suits you, jewel of the orient" (1-5). The poet recalls a young hooker

called Jade.
She had red dyed hair
and yellow teeth

They called her Jade

because she was Clyde's jewel of the orient
 Her real name was Sumiko...
 Hardy or Johnson or Smith

Her father would come looking for her,
 beat her again
 drag her home
 while her mother
 bawled and babbled in Japanese. (7-9,11-14,19-23)

Here Jade's feature's are anything but jewel-like, her life anything but exotic. Mirikitani contrasts orientalist stereotypes with the reality Japanese American women have suffered. Jade's father can be construed as an ex-army hick who brought back a Japanese wife he found while stationed in Asia. He wanted a subservient wife to pleasure him--she wanted a way out to an American world she thought offered wealth, class, and the opportunity to live a good life. Neither got what they had bargained for, and it became their child who bore the brunt of the mistake. Jade ran away for good, a life of prostitution and abuse ended when she "od'd" on heroin. Mirikitani's knowledge of *this* Jade rejects the woman's fantasy Jade:

I wanted to tell
 the woman who kept insisting
 my name was Jade

about Jade.
 who od'd. Her jaundiced body
 found on her cold floor
 mattress,
 roaches crawling in her ears,
 her dead eyes, glassy
 as jewels. (51-61)

Mirikitani lashes out with a chilling reality that disintegrates assumptions with a story more clear than a lecture on stereotypes. The transformation of a jewel into a symbol of the gruesome death of an Asian woman starkly counteracts the woman's ideal of 'oriental' beauty. Even if at the time Mirikitani could not reply to the woman who called her Jade, the poet gives us the words to fight ignorance and shows us that through the act of writing, it is never too late to talk back. Again, her silences have power.

Though Mirikitani's silences have strength, her construction of silence is multidimensional; shattering silence is an act of empowerment. Two central poems revolve around overcoming imposed silences to find voice: "Prisons of Silence" and "Breaking Silence." In "Prisons of Silence," Mirikitani enacts how Japanese Americans responded with silence to their forcible relocation into concentration camps during WWII. Told they were a threat to national security, that their American loyalty could not be trusted, that any evidence of Japanese cultural affiliation would be used against them, Japanese Americans surrendered their lives in shock. Two generations of labor in America had been negated, stripped away--more would be taken if they did not comply. Safety lay in a silence that became ingrained into the character of a people. With forced silence came shame. With shame came continued silence. "The strongest prisons are built / with walls of silence" (1-2). Imprisoned was a time "when life / would clamor through our windows," (7-8), when "we woke joyfully to the work" (9). Imprisoned were summer nights of pleasure between wife and husband, nights never to return after his death in the war. Imprisoned was her rage as she rebuilt her life "like a wall, unquestioning" (73-74). Walls of silence kept out joy, humanity, and love; kept in pain and rage. Mirikitani reveals harsh contradictions between times

of simple goodness and of unjust hatred. "Go home, Jap! / Where is home?" (26-27). Most Japanese Americans incarcerated had never seen Japan. They knew no other home than their farmland, in America. They had nowhere to go. No one spoke to them, and they could not speak to each other (29-30). The wall of silence grew around them. But finally, memories of a dead husband emerge and love escapes; the Issei woman speaker can no longer deny herself. She had kept "those moments / like a living silent seed" (10-11) and now they have grown strong, blossoming as speech inside her. Ironically, silence has given her the strength to overcome speechlessness. "This wall of silence crumbles / From the bigness of their crimes. / This silent wall / Crushed by living memory" (86-89). Not until the 80s did the Japanese American Redress and Reparations movement give people the courage and the dignity to speak. Mirikitani celebrates this speech, hard-won against generations of imposed silence.

From this cell of history
 this mute grave,
 we birth our rage.
 We heal our tongues.
 We listen to ourselves
 Korematsu, Hirabayashi, Yasui.
 We ignite the syllables of our names. (98-105)

The shedding of silence is not only the act of speaking, but of listening, of reclaiming pride in Japanese American identity. "Prisons of Silence" portrays the multiple layers of Japanese American expression--in keeping silence and breaking it, in listening, speaking, healing, and understanding.

In "Prisons of Silence," the speaker shifts between a collective voice and a woman who could be Mirikitani's mother, another Issei woman, or a

metafictive persona created from the poet's vision of a first-generation Japanese American woman's life. However, in "Breaking Silence," the woman who speaks is Mirikitani's mother, who testified before the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Japanese American Civilians after a forty-year silence. Mirikitani found out only after her mother mailed her a copy of the testimony, and conveys her feelings through poetry:

There are miracles that happen
she said.
From the silences
in the glass caves of our ears,
from the crippled tongue,
from the mute, wet eyelash,
testimonies waiting like winter. (1-7)

Her images bring the tears we cry at the beauty of a healed bird who can fly again, like those in "Prisons of Silence" who can finally speak, who "soar / from these walls of silence" (114-115). Ears are "glass caves" when painful words are hidden in their depths, but refused to be absorbed, rejected and denied by impermeable glass. Tongues are "crippled" when they have no power to move, to speak. An eyelash is "mute" when it pretends not to see, refusing to lift and allow the eye expression, but unable to hide its tears. The still of winter is beautiful, and holds the promise of spring life, a new beginning. Here, the silence of winter is one of hope and possibility that gathers strength, but also a silence that through the stanza protects, wounds, and expresses pain.

Japanese Americans were told silence was "golden like our skin...expedient like / horsestalls and deserts" (10, 15-16). Beautiful skin color

is turned against them, the opposite of golden or cherished, valueless and oppressive in the silence they assumed from necessity. To the rest of Americans their "bodies were loud / with yellow screaming flesh / needing to be silenced / behind barbed wire" (50-53). Mirikitani juxtaposes two versions of yellow--within Japanese Americans, the color is at once screaming and silent; it calls the attention of a hostile world yet attempts to hide from its wrath. Multiple juxtapositions are contained in the poet's contrasting descriptions of WWII ravages and the life of hope and beauty stolen from them, which stand side by side with Mirikitani's mother's testimony in the text of the poem. Her mother had

labored to sinew the ground
 to soften gardens pregnant with seed
 awaiting each silent morning
 birthing
 fields of flowers,
 mustard greens and tomatoes
 throbbing like the sea.

And then

All was hushed for announcements:

"Take only what you can carry" (38-47)

The land she built
 like hope
 grew quietly
 irises, roses, sweet peas
 opening, opening.

And then

all was hushed for announcements:

'...to be incarcerated for your own good' (66-73)

Their land is sensual, fertile under hands with hope and determined labor:
 Their land is cruel, punishing for skin color and taking back its hard-earned
 gifts. Silence in their fields brings beauty and life: Silence in their bodies
 brings imprisonment, or is brought by imprisonment.

Surrounding painful contrasts, Mirikitani's mother speaks, almost
 quietly. Her words, "peeling from her / like slivers of yellow flame" (29-30),
 burn, though spoken deliberately, softly, in no hurry. They do not rage or
 scream, yet have the power of a "vat of boiling water / surging through the
 coldest / bluest vein" (32-34). She begins slowly, her pauses marked by
 ellipses.

'Mr. Commissioner...
 ...the U.S. Army Signal Corps confiscated
 our property...it was subjected to
 vandalism and ravage. All improvements
 we had made before our incarceration
 was stolen or destroyed...
 I was coerced into signing documents
 giving you authority to take...' (17-24)

As her rage escapes her words flow quickly, with little pause or breath, then
 slow once again in a determination thickly moving through her sadness.

'Mr. Commissioner...
 So when you tell me I must limit
 testimony,
 when you tell me my time is up,
 I tell you this:
 Pride has kept my lips
 pinned by nails
 my rage confined.

But I exhume my past
 to claim this time. (77-86)
 Words are better than tears,
 so I spill them.
 I kill this,
 the silence... (90-93)

Every pause carries emotion--Mirikitani's mother's silence is not empty, but filled with the weight of 40 years, filled with deep anger and pain. Her words are heavy and biting, but so are her silences. And as her silence is shed, not only words and voice emerge but the miracles of vision, love, tears, recognition, and listening:

We see the cracks and fissures in our soil:
 We speak of suicides and intimacies,
 of longings lush like wet furrows,
 of oceans bearing us toward imagined riches,
 of burning humiliation and
 crimes by the government.
 Of self hate and love that breaks
 through silences.
 We are lightning and justice.
 Our souls become transparent like glass
 revealing tears for war-dead sons
 red ashes of Hiroshima
 jagged wounds from barbed wire.
 We must recognize ourselves at last.
 We are a rainforest of color
 and noise.
 We hear everything.
 We are unafraid.

Our language is beautiful. (97-115)

From testimony comes sight, speech, emotion, awareness, courage, hearing--the shedding of silence not only births voice but multiple layers of visual, sensory, and audio expression. The poem's end celebrates the historic struggles and survival of Japanese Americans, from migration to farm labor, from incarceration to atomic genocide to the struggle for justice, from self negation to joy in self recognition. More is shed than verbal silence--emotional, physical, and historical silence is stripped away to let loose the caged consciousness of an oppressed people.

Power speaks through the paradoxes in Mirikitani's poetry: the power of voice, of love, of struggle, and of silence. Through oxymoron, silence is a multi-faceted stone, oppressing and enabling, quiet and roaring--its depth is the strength of Shedding Silence. Tears of rage fall when one reads Mirikitani's poems, anger that humanity and joy have been brutally stripped from a people. Tears of inspiration fall upon understanding Mirikitani's poems, on seeing spirit survive and love reborn through struggle. As degradation and cruelty are juxtaposed with beauty and hope, her poetry sears our minds with irrevocable images. I am not alone in believing Janice Mirikitani to be one of the greatest poets of our time. And those who believe 'Asians can't write,' I *dare* you to read her work.

Ronyoung Kim: Clay Walls

Clay Walls is more to me than a first kiss, more than that exhilarating new sensation of wonder and delight. A first kiss dims in comparison to the sensual, passionate, experienced kisses that come later in life, but Clay Walls endures beyond the amazement and thrill that came with my first reading of

a novel by a Korean American, about Korean Americans. My eager search for other Korean American writers that followed my exposure to Clay Walls in no way diminished my appreciation for Ronyoung Kim's novel; in fact, I returned to read it again and again, each time finding new depth in the Korean American character--my own character. Clay Walls is the story of a Korean refugee⁸ family in the US, their internal and external struggles to survive. It is a story of the character and endurance of Korean heritage in two hostile environments: in the home, and out in society. It is also the story of my mother, though she came to America nearly 40 years later and as an immigrant, not a refugee. Like Haesu, the protagonist of the novel, my mother came from a wealthy, upper-class Korean family to encounter discrimination and economic hardship in the US. Like Haesu, my mother was married to a man who could not support the family because of an addiction, and like Haesu, my mother was forced to provide for her family despite the shame incurred by an upper-class woman demeaning herself by working. Their stories share striking parallels, attesting to both America's reluctance to change its attitudes and the perseverance of the Korean national character.

My mother married an alcoholic; Haesu married a gambler. Both were thrown into their marriages by family circumstances--my mother to escape her mother and sisters; Haesu to obey her parents. Both had little love for their husbands, and suffered varying degrees of abuse--Haesu was raped, and my mother was smothered. Nonetheless, each woman accepted her husband's dictates with outward passivity for the benefit of her children. Though Haesu dreaded 'sex' with her husband Chun, she obeyed his wishes because "It was her duty to comply...to avoid fighting in front of the children"

(71). Similarly, my mother gave in to my father's demands to create the pretense of a happy family, so badly did she want her children to grow up normal, and well-adjusted. In both cases, silence cannot be seen as weak; Haesu and my mother used incredible strength to endure the torture of an unhappy marriage--it took more strength to stay than to leave, more strength to stay silent than to speak out. I am amazed at my mother's courage in not running to others for help, not running away when she could. I am amazed in the great pride that kept her from admitting her suffering, just as Haesu "would never raise a subject that had been so demeaning to her" (30).

Through adversity, Korean American women have developed the ability to meet challenges with dignity. When hard times hit Chun, he gave into gambling, losing his livelihood and his family. Haesu supported her children by taking in seamstress work--the only means by which she could work at home, away from prying eyes. Similarly, when lay-offs and alcoholism incapacitated my father, my mother sewed at home to provide for us. Like Haesu, she taught herself how to sew, and with desperation and conviction, convinced her employer to hire her. And as Haesu's daughter Faye fell asleep nights with her mother sewing by a tiny light, the hum of my mother's sewing machine was my nighttime lullaby.

Faye and her brothers were born and raised in the US, like myself, by a mother who expected only the best treatment for her American citizen children. When her sons Harold and John were denied entrance into Edwards Military Academy on the basis of race, Haesu was enraged, and tried to start a campaign for justice. I am reminded of my mother who would storm into schools demanding that I receive the best services possible, that I not be slighted. Though discrimination for Haesu and her children was

blatant public policy, my mother tackled insidious institutional racism with resonant fire and determination.

Both Chun and my father took the back seat to Haesu and my mother when it came to supporting their children and fighting for their rights. "Don't waste your speech on me. I can't do anything about it," was Chun's attitude when it came to confronting barriers and injustice. My father too felt no control over the harsh world that shaped his life, succumbing to passivity. But despite their flaws and abuses, both Chun and my father deeply loved their wives. For a few fleeting moments, their wives loved them too, and they connected through shared struggle. The tragedy of Clay Walls is Haesu and Chun's relationship, for as she feels his death impending, at last she sees his love clearly. In her foretelling dream of death, Haesu tells her daughter, "We were in this beautiful garden together. He was walking toward me but the closer he got the further I would find myself from him" (219). Haesu feels for him, and says to her children, "'Whatever happens, we cannot let Papa be alone now,' her voice...small, like a child's." My mother, too, could not let my father die alone, and grieved deeply for him after he died of cancer, seeing more clearly his unyielding devotion and love for her--despite his dysfunctionality that has marred her life.

Clay Walls resonates in my family's experiences of hardship, yet also speaks to the simple joys of being Korean, to my mother's memories--and mine. My mother tells me she cannot live without trees, without a view of nature from the window. Haesu didn't care about the deficiencies of her new home, as "being able to look out to the garden made up for" (24) them. With passion my mother tended rosebushes outside our home, and with love and dedication Haesu cultivated dahlias in her front yard. To my mother, and to

Haesu, there was no greater joy during a cold Korean winter than warm roasted chestnuts. Like Haesu, I remember family outings in the mountains picking kosari, a delicious Korean vegetable. And like almost every Korean, in my mind I crunch the kimchi and slurp the nang mien of Haesu's description with uninhibited delight.

Clay Walls speaks to three generations of my family--to my grandmother, who tightly clutched the deeds to her inaccessible land in North Korea until the day she died, still hoping; to my mother, with Haesu's love for nature and pride through struggle; and to me, who fights to stay Korean and to understand. However, Clay Walls draws me not only through the experiences it shares, but through its gripping narrative style. Kim's writing hasn't been deeply explored by literary critics, but it has a power that deserves recognition.

In numerous articles, Kim is referred to as one of the new Asian American voices to emerge in the last decade along with a list of other writers. Perhaps such lists imply merit, but thus far discussion has been limited to newspaper and magazine reviews or brief thematic overviews in literary journals. Despite such limitations, however, a first-step has been taken toward an understanding of Kim's work. In "Beyond 'Clay Walls'" (1992), Chung-Hei Yun grounds Clay Walls in the context of Korean American literature and sociohistoric issues:

The centrifugal force shaping Korean American literary imagination is generated from the loss of homeland through Japanese annexation, the mutilation of the land when it was divided into North and South Korea following the liberation from Japan after WW2, the Korean War, and the post-1965 exodus (80).

Although Yun touches on the symbolism of the clay walls as Chun's "crumbling and ineffectual...attitude toward life" (88), her main aim is to

illuminate the novel's theme of "struggle to nurture and cultivate transplanted roots" (86).

Elaine Kim in "'Such Opposite Creatures': Men and Women in Asian American Literature," presents a short character analysis of Haesu as a heroine figure, dismissing Chun as a "plain-thinking, hard working man [who] thinks of life as the plodding recurrence of work, food, sleep, and sex" (84). Conversely, Kichung Kim in a San Francisco Chronicle review entitled "Coming to Terms with a New Life," sees "Chun's experience...[as] the most unbearably painful part of the book" who declines "because Haesu provides him with neither understanding nor sympathetic affection" (10). From my perspective, both critics are right; one of the novel's chief strengths is its real-to-life, multi-dimensional characters complete with flaws. Clay Walls is not just about sexism, racism, or immascultation, though it is a credit to the novel that the characters of Haesu and Chun can provide insight into such concepts' impact on human nature. Haesu and Chun are not characters to be read in just one way; they are to be reconstructed and reconceptualized through multiple levels of meaning. The couple's imperfections, loves, and hates provide compelling, often painful insight into marriage and struggle both with a new spouse and with a new society; their relationship must be conceived both in terms of internal character and the external forces which pull them.

The longest work to engage Clay Walls is a Korean Culture review by S. E. Solberg, entitled "Clay Walls: Korean American Pioneers." Solberg offers both the closest look at Kim's narrative technique and perhaps the most problematic reading thus far. He briefly touches upon Kim's skill as a writer: her "sharp eye for telling detail" (32), her admirably successful shifts in

narrative voice "where the limits are respected, where only what is central to narrative and character is presented" (33), and her "awareness of where reality verges on absurdity,...[her] nuance of language and...selection of situation [which] create[s] scenes that linger in memory" (33). However, he lauds the novel based on two primary criteria: the first, that it is "true to itself [in terms of the]...interior vision of the author and the narrative demands of he form" and the second, "its credible rendering of the life of Koreans" (32). His first criterion is a complement to the novel's self-containment and sense of closure (thought-provoking, yet abstract, as the comment is not further discussed); his second comment measures value based on the novel's accuracy in portraying the Korean American experience. Both comments are problematic. The first fails to recognize that nothing has been resolved for Haesu, Chun, or their daughter by the end of the novel, and that in such lack of resolution lies strength. Koreans in America have not yet secured that stable position or happy ending--it seems to contradictory to read Clay Walls as a novel with satisfying closure; I would prefer to do the opposite and leave open realms of possibility. Solberg's second value judgment also poses a problem, firstly because it implies that a homogeneous Korean American experience exists (and that he knows what it is), and secondly because it suggests that any novel based on the 'realities' of an ethnic community somehow deserves merit. I believe that an individual Korean American can appreciate the novel if it speaks to his/her experiences, but it would be presumptuous to assume that it holds similar attraction to all Korean Americans, who are heterogeneous within their ethnic grouping. There is a danger in trying to define an ethnic experience within a novel, and in reading an ethnic novel as definitive of that experience, especially as notions of Asian

or Korean American identity are constantly being challenged and debated, are constantly evolving. We must use Asian American literature to educate, but not in such a way that limits our identities.

Solberg's closing comments stem from a mainstream enthusiasm of ethnic American writing which makes his acclaim of the novel stand on even shakier ground for the Asian American reader: "...we are left with an indomitable group of characters enriching and illuminating of a formerly little-known American world. How much poorer we would be without access through this warm and moving story"(35). Solberg sounds like a white American who has just eaten Korean food for the first time, and feels enlightened as a result. How can he tell the food is good, having no basis for comparison and having never cooked it himself? Korean American literature cannot substitute for Korean American history, nor should it attempt to. Clay Walls is the much needed artistic portrayal of *a* Korean American family--not *the* Korean American family. Solberg is joined by a New York Times Book Review perspective which "is grateful for being invited into that closeted but lively world"--as though Koreans are a fascinating alternative species who have remained anonymous to American society by their own choosing, rather than being forcibly relegated to obscurity through racism.

Perhaps Solberg's main fault is his over-enthusiasm--in becoming a sort of privileged insider to the Korean American experience and in fitting Clay Walls into the typical immigrant success story. He does not take into consideration the important differences in attitude and experience between immigrants and refugees, lumping early Korean settlers who fled Japanese colonialism together with voluntary European immigrants. He reads the

novel as "a work of celebration and validation," as "central to all immigrant fictions is a celebratory, heroic tone: in overcoming failure and defeat there is the prospect of survival, of hope, if not in the present, then in the future through the children" (32). In his comments, he overlooks the legalized discrimination against Asians other people of color that did not occur for whites; discrimination that ethnic communities today have still not overcome, as inequities persist even where legislation has changed. Solberg also seems to miss the tragedy of both Chun and Haesu's lives and unfulfilled dreams, as well as the racial and economic conflict their children endured--conflict with no seeming end. At best, "celebration" is an overstatement. Furthermore, Solberg lauds Faye's narrative as "a fresh new version of 'becoming American'" (34)--statement that privileges 'American' over 'Korean' or 'Korean American.' In the novel Faye is connected to her culture through her mother, peers, and 'gut-feeling.' Though brought up in America, the content of her character is distinctly Korean American--Faye can never fully blend into mainstream American society; she would not be accepted and her strong sense of heritage would not let her. Solberg, apparently, believes that the 'American dream' can come true for anyone, regardless of race.

Though Solberg's review tends to be shallow in places, it is important to note that he includes more stylistic discussion than any other critic--than any Asian American critic. While I agree that a sociohistoric grounding is first and foremost essential to understand Asian American fiction, why cannot such a discussion be coupled with an analysis of style? In striving for political power and self-determination, Asian American scholars tend to view thematic considerations as more empowering, more necessary to

community awareness and growth. However, with the current burgeoning of Asian American literature and criticism, there seems more than enough room for the uncovering of stylistic strategies. In developing an Asian American literary tradition, we need to see that our literature will not be recognized in the mainstream until its stylistic merits are proven. I do not call for a strictly formal method of analysis, but rather a fusion of political and artistic awareness, which I now attempt to accomplish with Clay Walls.

Clay Walls is deceptively straightforward on first reading--blunt, to the point, not too flowery or symbolic. However, the novel presents a powerful appeal that grows from the Korean American experience into a form of its own. It is the theme of paradox/contradiction, a theme so much a part of the Korean life in America that it has infused itself into the writing style of Ronyoung Kim. (Or, perhaps, she has adopted such a writing style as it lends itself well to the theme of contradiction.) Contradiction as theme resounds throughout Clay Walls: the contradiction between Haesu's class status in Korea and her economic situation in the US; between American citizenship and the denial of equal rights based on race; between love and marriage; between anti-Japanese sentiments and Korean/Asian American affinity; between yangban and communist; between self-image and societal perception; between 'Korean' and 'American.' Contradiction as technique takes the form of juxtaposition in Kim's novel: juxtaposition of contrasting images, of poetic language versus plain, of narrative voice, and of silence versus voice.

When beautiful images are juxtaposed with ugly, the ugly becomes even uglier, as in the opening scene of Clay Walls. Haesu reflects upon her job as a maid in a rich white lady's house, a job she was about to quit.

...she had admired the peach-like pinks and the varying shades of blues of the flowering Persian pattern. She felt an affinity with the

design. Perhaps what they say is true, that sometime in the distant past Hittites were in Korea. She ran her fingers over the surface of the table. The mahogany wood still glowed warmly from her earlier care (6).

The house and its decor are lovely, but the woman inside is hideous. She condescends to Haesu and tries to withhold pay for the day's work, and when Haesu insists, laughingly offers only half. When Haesu rejects the insult of such a sum, "Mrs. Randolph glared at Haesu. She began to fume. 'Why you insolent yellow...'" (6) Set against the image of a beautiful house, the woman's cheap, racist behavior is all the more despicable. Kim's opening scene is also powerful in that Haesu speaks very little English yet articulately conveys strong pride and will. Words are not necessary to gain the moral and emotional advantage over a woman fluent in speech; Kim asserts Haesu's dominance of spirit with body language alone.

In another experience with racism, Kim juxtaposes two scenes. In the first, Haesu dresses to go house-hunting, "blushing with excitement" (19) and making sure her hat and makeup are just right. In the next, a landlord takes one look at Haesu and her friend, then closes the curtain on them with a wave of 'no' (20). Their rejection is all the more poignant when seen in relation to their previous excitement--all the more cruel.

Not only is juxtaposition employed to illuminate the injustices of America, but to emphasize deep emotional connection to Korea. Poetic language is used to describe things Korean, while descriptions of America are flatter, bleaker, and less eloquent. Through Haesu, Kim reveals the stylistic intent of the novel: "She had plenty to say about ignorance, prejudice, and discrimination. But Chun was right, it would be wasted on him. To whom then, she wondered. All her thoughts were formed in her native language. In English, she could only utter one or two isolated words, using her hands

when words failed her..." (22-23). Haesu wonders who will hear her: it is we, the readers. As Kim writes convincingly from a first-generation perspective, it would make little sense to use elevated English: she sticks to nonverbal communication, blunt dialogue, and simple description--except with subjects and memories uniquely Korean. Even with limited English proficiency, passion brings vivid detail and language flowing with emotion--my experience teaching ESL students attests to this phenomenon, as do Haesu and Chun's narrations.

Haesu's fascination with a white lady's carpet stems from proud Korean sentiment: "Such lovely patterns," says Haesu. "Like the twining tendrils on Korean chests" (8). Here Haesu makes use of simple alliteration and simile, whereas to depict things American, only the occasional adjective is used. For Haesu, when Korean, clothing takes on beauty: "She too should be in silk, airy gauze floating freely in the night air because Korean skirts were full and unconstrained" (86). Yet, when American, clothing is unpleasing and described in terse sentences: "Her arms seemed bound by the long sleeves buttoned tightly at the wrist. The dress resembled one Greta Garbo had worn in a movie. That was the reason Haesu had chosen it" (86) Descriptive juxtaposition is also demonstrated when Haesu surveys a prospective house in America; Kim's language is bare and stripped of passion.

Haesu was drawn to the pale green wood-frame house trimmed in white...The narrow walk that led from the porch steps to the curb presupposed the ownership of an automobile, for now, Chun's truck. The living room faced the street, as did all the houses in the neighborhood... (35-36).

Here the only excitement or emotion lies in the "pale green...trimmed in white"--bleak indeed compared to her following reminiscence of Korea. "On the hills surrounding her hometown, Sunchoun, Korea's national flower

bloomed wild in shades of lavender, pink, and white. She could still see the azalea-like blossoms in her mind" (36). Pictures of Korea are vividly colored with full, flowing language, while pictures of America are created with blunt, simple, emotionless words. When placed side by side, we feel Haesu's spiritual connection to her homeland and are unsparingly aware how little American has to offer.

American images and ideas are more difficult for Haesu to describe; they do not flow to her heart's rhythm. Consider the following as an authorial comment on Haesu's narrative: "The interjection of English words broke the flow of their conversation, abruptly bringing the subject to a close" (63). What follows replicates the language Kim uses to portray America through Haesu's eyes: "The landscape was flat; they had left the city of stucco buildings and wood-frame houses behind. Isolated gray shacks jutted..." (63) Just as the landscape becomes flat and isolated, so does Haesu's descriptive voice when she speaks of America.

Kim's narrative of "Haesu" is constant juxtaposition of 'flat' and 'filled-out.' With great joy, Haesu and her children eat nang mien and kimchi--Korean cold noodles and spicy pickled cabbage--in one of Haesu/Kim's most fluent, sensory, memorable descriptions:

Haesu and the children topped the mound of noodles with kimchi and meat. Some spilled down the sides and into the juice. Almost in unison, they raised their noodles with their chopsticks to draw the meat and kimchi into the folds of the slippery strands, churning the mixture until everything was saturated with broth. Lifting a white cascade of noodles to their mouths, they began to slurp, pausing to bite into crisp kimchi or chew an unyielding piece of meat (90).

Even Chun, who Haesu previously described as uncommunicative and terse to the point of rudeness, comes alive in the sharing of a Korean image. After

Haesu cut an apple into the shape of a flower to display on the boulevard, she stood back to examine her handiwork.

'Ibuji?' she said, asking Chun to confirm that it was beautiful. / He nodded. 'It looks like a lotus.' / His poetic reference took her by surprise. Her look made Chun blush. / 'Cigarettes,' he blurted and dashed across the street to a drugstore. / ...The lotus was a Buddhist symbol of purity, a flower that bloomed even when rooted in stagnant water (12-13).

With his blush and escape, we begin to learn of Chun's love for Haesu--even if she cannot see it, he is given depth through the symbolic description of the lotus. We are given hope that someday he may bloom from the stagnant pond of America, that he will not allow himself to rot. This scene is a foregrounding of the second section of the novel, told from Chun's perspective

Chun's voice alternates from richly descriptive to dry and terse, depending on whether he narrates his life in Korea or America. In Korea he is beautiful, in harmony with the land, communicating with nature; in America he is out of his element and does not know how to relate to people or survive--though he appears much smarter and more sensitive than in Haesu's portrayal. Through Kim's juxtaposition of two distinct descriptive tones, Chun's multidimensionality is illuminated; in fact, the entire chapter is meant as a juxtaposition, to be read against Haesu's portrayal of his evils and shortcomings. Here we understand Chun's inability to cope, and are sympathetic to his failings. We can no longer hate him but feel his pain intensely, realizing that he is both victim of the class system in Korea and racial oppression in America.

Following the terrible news of losing a business contract, Chun begins to reminisce. He recalls his father's advice in how to cope, and remembers:

He had taken Harold and John over the same fields, hiking all day to retrace the steps of his past with his sons. They had gone to the gravesite of Chun's mother and father. Years ago he was saddened when the news of their deaths had reached him in Los Angeles; his mind had been on Haesu who was on her way to him from Shanghai. Five months ago, standing over their graves, he had wept (136).

His thoughts reveal the love and caring Chun has for his sons, wife, and parents--and for the earth. A direct contrast of Chun is presented to Haesu's depiction of an insensitive wife-rapist who cared only for eating, sleeping, working, and sex. His poet's soul--hinted at in the lotus scene--is revealed in his connection with nature, while in the American city he is stripped of inspiration, coarse. "As far back as he could recall, his life was regulated by the seasons. During the rains, mud oozed between his toes as he fought with the clawing earth, struggling to keep from being swallowed by the undisciplined furrows" (136). Here Chun paints a picture of his life in Korea as a young man, full of joy at the simple pleasures in life--eating, dressing, bathing--surrounded by the things he loves: "The scent of sesame oil, beansprouts, and boiled meat, forming a fragrance that filled him with contentment"; freshly washed clothing "free of soil and beaten flat with wooden sticks" which he buries his face in, enjoying the fresh smell; the first exhilarating step into the icy inlet water (136-137). Conversely, in America, he expresses little enjoyment in life; his struggles to support his family and make his wife happy utterly drain him. After losing his biggest contract as a fruit vendor,

Chun had been able to keep the news from Haesu for several months. He continued to give her the same amount of 'house money' each month, drawing it from the safe where he kept all his money. He kept his cash where he could see it and count it whenever he wanted; no bank run by perfect strangers was going to handle his money (139).

In America, Chun's problems make him decidedly less articulate than in Korea. Chun's narration reveals him as cramped with pressure to survive, while in response to the same issues, Haesu's shows him riddled with faults.

Unlike Harold, everything John did seemed to get on Chun's nerves. He rarely held the baby, and when John became old enough to toddle about, Chun held him responsible for infractions that were clearly Harold's doing. Haesu blamed it on Chun's abnormal working hours. 'You don't get enough sleep. You're in a bad humor and take it out on John. Change your business' (41)

To Haesu, Chun is strange, a closed book that she cannot read, who answers her naggings more with snores than words. Their inability to communicate stems from the large gap between Haesu's noble birth and Chun's peasant origins. She speaks to him as though he is stupid; he shuts her out. She cannot see his beauty, for in America, it is buried beneath layers of hardship. In Korea, though, Chun is beautiful, and the chance to see him as such makes his failed marriage and life all the more tragic.

Droplets of water dotted his clothes as he ran his hands through his hair. The stream of water he wrung out of his loincloth splattered dust onto his feet...Warmed by the advancing sun, the pine needles began to release their pungence...He whistled softly to himself and lolled on the riverbank...His black hair shimmered in the sunlight (128).

We see Chun as Haesu never can, for in her eyes, all he cares about is whether she cooks dinner or obeys his demands for sex. In her narration, Haesu never seems to look at Chun long enough to describe him--only enough to feel disdain. Chun, in his narration of their conflict, expresses a sense of powerlessness in trying to communicate with Haesu. "Chun opened his mouth to speak, then closed it" (139). First, he is speechless, then exasperated and mocking; finally he walks out. Though both characters are not caring or empathetic toward each other in this scene, Chun leaves with

the sense that "it would be nice to satisfy Haesu--money or no money" (140). He is not the cold-hearted, insensitive clod we first thought him, as he still retains the deep feelings that sprang from his heart for Haesu in Korea. The next scene juxtaposes his naive joy at the news of their marriage's arrangement with our knowledge of its impending failure. "Ecstatic beyond belief, Chun visualized his life with Haesu. She would obey his commands, serve his needs, and mother his children. At night they would be bedded together, pressed against the warm ondol floor, night after night, forever in Sunchoun" (142). Obviously, Chun has a lot to learn about dealing with women, but it is also obvious that no one has taught him. Bittersweet is his remembrance of his dream of Haesu, for only once did she allow herself to respond to his sexual advances with any warmth. Sadly, Chun realizes that "Haesu's change of heart had less to do with him and more to do with her disappointments in Korea. He was still waiting." (142). He reveals to us that he is aware of his wife's feelings, that he knows she takes no joy in sex with him--previously, we believed he neither knew nor cared, but now we are aware that he still does care deeply, that he still hopes for his wife's love.

Though the emotions Chun reveals in no way justify his acts of rape, we see more their physical conflict as representative of their battle of wills: Haesu vows "she would never respond to his advances" (30) just as Chun is "determined not to grovel for her love" (142). Somehow, however, in unwanted sex, he does grovel, and Haesu gains the upper hand by refusing to be stirred: "...she became wooden. Her lack of response only served as a goad, intensifying his determination to arouse her" (17). In their one act of mutual love, Haesu denies Chun the kiss he craves, withholding her intimate self that he longs for. Chun cannot satisfy Haesu--he does not know what to do in

bed, and she does not teach him. "He wanted to prolong the pleasure she now shared with him, but she was too eager...She wanted him to go on, but he couldn't (129). Within Haesu's role as wife, a role that she did not choose, she denies Chun any pleasure, but in doing so denies herself. Though often the seemingly silent victim, she shows her strength to fight him mentally--sadly, though, it is this strength, this lack of love and respect that drives him to gamble and to leave their house in shame.

Kim shows Chun as a man frustrated from his toils and his wife's insensitivity, but nonetheless one who retains love.

What the hell does she know, he angrily asked himself. While she sleeps, I'm at Ninth and San Pedro, dealing with muscle-bound, foul-mouthed men...While she sleeps, truckers pull into the market, hauling their load from packing houses...While she dreams, at the first light of day come the retailers...(148-149).

He is angry at her constant badgering, but his tirade is tinged with a longing picture of his sleeping wife, an implied desire to be in her dreams.

Tenderness seeps out. After he gambles his life away, Chun "longed to be with Haesu, to press against her satin underslip and warm his hands on her breasts. His longing ceased when he realized he would have to tell her what he had done. Chun shuddered and rubbed his arms" (182). Not only through nature but through his wife Chun's poetic soul is revealed; a sharp contrast to his vision of his world in America, and to how Haesu believes he feels. We see Chun as a product of his peasant naiveté, his struggles in America, of Haesu's coldness. Through Kim's skillful juxtaposition of voices, images, and language, Chun's failures and Haesu's sufferings take on new, paradoxical light. Only in retrospect can Haesu see Chun as we do.

When Haesu journeys to Korea without Chun, glad to be away from his demands and complaints, she spots him from the boat. "Standing alone,

he looked as if he had been abandoned. Suddenly, Haesu wished he was going with them" (67). Her fleeting feelings are given explanation and take on depth when Chun leaves the family to find work, and when he dies. "You'll never understand what your Papa and I went through," (190) she tells her daughter Faye. Now, it is clear to Haesu--through shared struggle, they formed a connection akin to love. She had spent years blaming Chun for their hardships in America, because he had mistakenly been identified by the Japanese as a communist student protester. Perhaps when the family is forced to return to Korea--this time, as a result of her unwitting entanglement in a subversive plot--she gains greater acceptance for her situation. Then, when she learns Chun is about to die, her voice cracks, "small, like a child's," (218) when she tells her children. "Love was in Momma's eyes," Faye narrates, "We have to bring Papa home...one way or another" (218-219). Tears fall at his funeral, and we feel Haesu's sense of loss. Though she expressed no love for him in their life together, she truly wants to give him something in his death. To her children, she says:

'You'll get to see the plot I chose. There were two available at the price we could afford. One had water seeping into it so I chose the other one. It's on a slight hill, and dry. I thought Papa would like that better.' Her voice broke and she began to cry (223).

We do not hear from Haesu's voice any change of heart--and if indeed the novel's narration resumed from her voice, she might not admit her feelings. Nonetheless, their shared life holds meaning for her now, and her regrets surface in a dream. "We were in this beautiful garden. He was walking toward me but the closer he got to me, the further I would find myself from him" (219). Here she recognizes his efforts to reach her, realizes it was she who kept him away. The image is heart-wrenching.

Clay Walls is a profoundly moving story of hardship, loss, and love; the story of a Korean couple thrown into an American life they had little resource to cope with. Haesu's survival in providing for herself and her children prompts critics like Kichung Kim to read the novel as a "necessary and triumphant" journey (10), and although I do not disagree, it is certain that the paths of the children will be full of conflict and struggle, certain that Chun and Haesu's tragedy will linger. Through the novel, Kim pulls at the heart with the themes of contradiction inherent in the Korean American's life: a high-class mentality is read against lower-class suffering; passion for justice is read against rights denied; the beauty of Korea against the American ugliness Koreans are subjected to; Korean nationalism against compelling humanity, as with Faye and her fellow Asian American--yet Japanese--schoolmate. Such paradoxes become painfully clear, not through outright exposition, but through Kim's juxtaposition of narrative perspectives, of image, and language. Strength and harmony in Korea--and in things Korean--become bleakly devoid of emotion and humanity in America. What is unsaid by one character is illuminated in the eyes of another; beauty of character makes ugliness all the more sorrowful to witness. Kim's style must be recognized as a subtle, yet powerful reflection of the Korean character and its suffering in America.

Concluding Comments

Janice Mirikitani and Ronyoung Kim are two Asian American women writers who employ the powerful stylistic strategy of juxtaposition, one which reflects the paradoxical existence of Asian Americans and incorporates oxymoronic silences that force the reader to see our struggles with a clarity

akin to empathy. In their works, conflicting images, perspectives, and voices are juxtaposed, forcing us to reconcile two cultures, to reconcile the scream of our fervent desire for equality and justice with the 'silence' of racism and exploitation. Demanding at once both silence and speech, such struggles occur within every relationship: between innermost selves, between husbands and wives, between group and society. Through the eyes of Mirikitani and Kim, we oppress each other and ourselves. We desire basic rights yet cannot be humane to each other, like Haesu and Chun, and like the husband and wife in "Without Tongue." We hear through these two writers how the duality of existence America can exacerbate every human failing, how the desire to succeed can turn into the desire to tear another Asian American apart with weapons of silence. Through oxymoronic representations of loud silences, bitter hope, passive resistance, and resigned determination, paradox infuses Asian American writing style and defines our identities, identities which show no signs of achieving fixed resolution in a society which does not allow the reconciliation of 'Asian' and 'American,' constantly forcing us to redefine and re-fuse both terms and ourselves into constantly shifting notions of 'Asian American.'

I ask now, which Asian American writers join Mirikitani and Kim in their piercing use of juxtaposition? In Amy Tan's Joy Luck Club, Tan juxtaposes stories of America with tales of China, mothers' voices with daughters'. In Maxine Hong Kingston's China Men, Kingston juxtaposes historical fact with re-told myth with personal experience in a shifting myriad of perspectives. Perhaps deeper investigation into Asian American literary juxtaposition will help define an Asian American literary tradition, along with the works of King-Kok Cheung and Sau-Ling Wong. To further such

definition, I now ask, what other stylistic strategies have Asian American writers adopted, revised, and conceived of? It is time to explore our art, to search for what makes it powerful and strong, and to seek out, as in Thais Morgan's formulation of intertextuality, the "'networks or webs'" (274) which link the styles of Asian American writers and create a viable body of work. It is time to seek out, for ourselves and for the larger society in which we live, an Asian American literary tradition.

In urging further discussion of style and recognizing the evolution of critical discourse in 'minority' literature--thus recognizing that "Asian American literature is remarkably undertheorized when compared to African American, Chicano, and Native American literatures" (Campomanes 72)--it seems appropriate to quote a 1958 scholar of African American literature:

It is the art, in the long run, that matters...whether by white or colored critics,...[Negro] novels are treated as primarily social documents, and 'evaluated' according to the social bias of their evaluator...It is essential to understand that these are not literary judgments, and that they have nothing to do with the value of the novel as a work of art (Bone 7).

Although I adopt a less adamant stance than Bone in separating social context from literary judgment, as I believe that in today's America it is imperative that Asian American novels be viewed as social testimony, for they fulfill gaping holes in the consciousness of the country, we cannot expect our literature to be acknowledged with equal merit based on political message alone. To achieve literary recognition and to understand our own literary tradition, we must continue to examine elements of style and art in Asian American literature--how our writers have appropriated, manipulated, and created unique styles to strengthen their voices and messages. Only with an awareness of our literary conventions can we ignite much-needed debates on the aesthetic value of our literature and undeniably present to the world our

unique, dynamic craft. I would like to believe I have sparked such a debate with those who believe that Mirikitani and Kim are not particularly skillful; I would like to hear voices praising those writers who they believe are more deserving of attention. Surely, Maxine Hong Kingston is not the only Asian American writer worthy of canonization; as Asian American literary scholars, we must free our critical voices to explore other writers with the depth and appreciation we have given Kingston. While Kingston's works may be an invaluable cornerstone of Asian American literature, a single author does not constitute our literary tradition. Today, in the 1990s, the task is clear: we must strive to illuminate the emerging conventions of Asian American novels, plays, short stories, and poetry. We must give our writers the attention they deserve, and validate critically a vibrant, powerful, and beautiful Asian American literary tradition.

Notes

1. Each of the historical events listed are discussed throughout Takaki's Strangers From a Different Shore (1989) and Sucheng Chan's Asian Americans: An Interpretive History (1991) and Asian Californians (1991), all excellent texts which overview the Asian American experience from perspectives both historical and personal. Additional information on the Japanese American internment camps can be found in Michi Weglyn's Years of Infamy: The Untold Story of America's Concentration Camps (1976).
2. The anti-immigrant scapegoating of California politicians is a common issue in today's classrooms and media. See, for example, the August 23, 1993 Newsweek article by Andrew Murr entitled "A Nasty Turn on Immigrants: California: Wilson Declares the State 'Under Siege.'"
3. Unity newspaper, a grassroots publication for social change based in Oakland, focuses predominantly on working-class and oppressed nationalities in America. "Demystifying America's Welfare System," by Nick Paget Clark, is one of its many articles dealing with how America copes with poverty. Ronald Takaki's "A Dream Deferred: The Crisis of Losing Ground" in From Different Shores: Perspectives on Race and Ethnicity in America, also points to the feminization of poverty--how single mothers are forced into welfare dependency. Additionally, in a 1991 lecture, San Jose State anthropology professor Soo-Young Chin discussed the popular misconception that Southeast Asians rely heavily on welfare assistance.
- 4-5. Japan-bashing's roots and ramifications have also been explored in Unity newspaper, in such articles as "Japan-Bashing: Dangerous Consequences for Asian Americans" by Jeanie Yonemura. In Strangers (483), Takaki mentions how Asian Americans face violent attitudes and reactions in an atmosphere of economic dissatisfaction attributed to Japan. Additionally, on tour during the last presidential election and on his television program, Jesse Jackson has spoken widely on the issue, rejecting the notion of America as Japan's victim and urging new policies of domestic improvement, not only for the sake of Asian Americans but for the betterment of the entire country. Perceptions: The New Yellow Peril, by Sandra Gin Yep, is a recent documentary depicting hate crimes against Asian Americans in the 1980s as well as their motivations, including the economic scapegoating of Japan and its resulting backlash. Also see Sacramento's Asian Week newspaper, which reports weekly on hate crimes against Asian Americans.
6. Many economists and ethnic studies scholars have researched how Reaganomics created levels of poverty, homelessness, and illiteracy even worse than the pre-60s. When an entire nation suffers, it is almost inevitable

that people of color bear the brunt of the hardship. Takaki's "A Dream Deferred" illustrates this point, as does Unity's "After Reaganomics: The Difficult Challenge," by Andy Wong, 1993.

7. For background on the early Korean refugees to America, see the texts listed in the first note. For more detailed information, see Bong-Youn Choy's Koreans in America (1979) and Quiet Odyssey: A Pioneer Korean Woman in America by Mary Paik Lee (1990).

8. To assert my claim that the early Korean Americans were refugees as opposed to immigrants, I use Robert Blauner's theoretical framework in "Colonized and Immigrant Minorities" in his 1972 Racial Oppression in America, as do many Asian American studies scholars. His argument is highly useful in understanding the Korean American experience, here specifically its first premise that "racial groups in America are, and have been, colonized peoples; therefore their social realities cannot be understood in the framework of immigration and assimilation that is applied to European ethnic groups."

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