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Angela Noelle Brada-Williams

San Jose State University, noelle.brada-williams@sjsu.edu

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Asian American Literary Studies at Maturity

NOELLE BRADA-WILLIAMS
San Jose State University

ASIAN AMERICAN NOVELISTS: A BIO-BIBLIOGRAPHICAL CRITICAL SOURCEBOOK. Edited by Emmanuel S. Nelson. Westport, CT: Greenwood P, 2000. xi + 422 pp. \$99.95.

BOLD WORDS: A CENTURY OF ASIAN AMERICAN WRITING. Edited by Rajini Srikanth and Esther Iwanaga. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2001. xxiv + 442 pp. Hardbound, \$59; paperback, \$25.

A RESOURCE GUIDE TO ASIAN AMERICAN LITERATURE. Edited by Sau-ling Cynthia Wong and Stephen H. Sumida. New York: MLA, 2001. vi + 345 pp. Hardbound, \$40; paperback \$22.

WORDS MATTER: CONVERSATIONS WITH ASIAN AMERICAN WRITERS. Edited by King-Kok Cheung. Honolulu: U of Hawaii P/UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 2000. 402 pp. \$25.95.

To understand where Asian American literary studies is now, one will find it helpful to examine where the field started. *Asian American* is an identification used to define Americans with ancestors from a variety of nations from the largest and most populous continent in the world and with a variety of histories and cultures that often vary greatly from (or have even been antagonistic toward) one another. Originally, it was used to replace the term *Oriental* and marked a specific political consciousness of one's racial identity. As shown in Cheung's *Words Matter: Conversations with Asian American Writers*, individuals vary greatly as to whether this label is more or less accurate than simply the national label of *American* or distinct ethnic identities such as *Chinese American*, *South Asian*, or *Indian American*. American laws, policies, and society do not always treat the various Asian ethnic communities in America consistently, and Asians in America are not uniform in their experiences or expression of American identity. However, there are enough common-

alities in the various experiences of many Americans of Asian heritage to make the term a viable category for both political affiliation and scholarly analysis, including the shared histories of exclusionary immigration, anti-miscegenation, or alien land laws; mainstream suspicions of Asians as inherently unassimilable or un-American; domestic forms of Orientalism; the process of immigration and assimilation; and values, social norms, and forms of spirituality that span the boundaries defined by single ethnicities.

As the title of Rajini Srikanth and Esther Iwanaga's new anthology, *Bold Words: A Century of Asian American Writing*, makes clear, texts fitting within the category of Asian American literature have been written for over a century. However, just thirty-five years ago, American classrooms omitted virtually all aspects of what now might be called Asian America: its history, its culture, its literature. In the preface to his *Asian American Literature: A Brief Introduction and Anthology*, Shawn Wong states, "At no time in my undergraduate English and American literature studies or in my entire public school education had any teacher ever used or even mentioned a work of fiction or poetry by an Asian American writer" (xv). In *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, one of his several important histories of multicultural America, Ronald Takaki describes the desire for a broader and thus more accurate study of American culture by citing Adrienne Rich: "What happens . . . 'when someone with the authority of a teacher' describes our society, and 'you are not in it'? Such an experience can be disorienting—a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing" (16).¹

Beginning in the late 1960s, students, artists, and community activists worked to construct an image in that mirror and created the concept of Asian American identity. The Third World Student Strike that took place at San Francisco State University in 1968–69 is a good event to use to mark the birth of this field as an academic discipline. Partially in response to the U.S. presence in Vietnam and inspired by the success of African Americans during the Civil Rights era, students demanded that the college curriculum reflect the real diversity of America rather than a narrowly defined American culture based solely on Euro-American literature and history. Student activism led directly to the founding of Ethnic Studies programs on the campuses of San Francisco State, the University of California at Berkeley, and other colleges and universities across the United States.

While students were demanding access to the study of Asian American literature and culture, Asian American community activists were directly connecting art and political concerns. In 1972, the Kearny Street Workshop was founded in San Francisco's Chinatown/Manilatown area, specifically at 854 Kearny Street in the International Hotel, the build-

ing that would become a symbol of grassroots Asian American community activism. Still bearing the title of “the oldest multidisciplinary Asian Pacific American arts organization in the country” (http://www.kearnystreet.org/about_ksw/history/index.html), Kearny Street is involved both in the training of artists and in the exhibiting, disseminating, and even publication of Asian American art in a variety of forms, including literature. Its mission statement exemplifies the direct connection members make between community politics and art: “The mission of Kearny Street Workshop is to produce and present art that enriches and empowers Asian Pacific American communities. Our vision is to achieve a more just society by connecting Asian Pacific American (APA) artists with community members to give voice to our cultural, historical, and contemporary issues” (http://www.kearnystreet.org/about_ksw/index.html).

The Asian American Theater Company (AATC) of San Francisco has also passed its thirtieth birthday. Founded in 1973, the AATC joined companies such as the East West Players of Los Angeles (founded in 1965) and the Asian American Theater Lab of the Mark Taper Forum (founded in 1967) in developing a community-based theater that explores Asian American themes and provides an outlet for Asian American artists. These early pioneers have been aided in the last three decades by a variety of other theaters in places as diverse as New York, Minneapolis, and San Diego. Roberta Uno’s essay in *Bold Words* provides an excellent overview of the various theater companies working in this area and notes the dates of their foundings.

Bamboo Ridge Press in Hawaii, which focuses on the local literature of Hawaii, has been responsible for publishing a wide range of authors who fit under the rubric of Asian American writers, while the University of Washington Press has brought a large number of pre-movement Asian American texts back into print, including classics such as Carlos Bulosan’s 1946 *America Is in the Heart* and even lesser-known texts such as Winnifred Eaton’s 1903 *The Heart of Hyacinth*. Temple University Press is notable for its early commitment to publishing important scholarship on Asian American literary and cultural studies. Since 1991, the Asian American Writer’s Workshop in New York has produced a great deal of important Asian American literary works via its workshops, journal, and small press. As a distinct field, Asian American literary studies has clearly reached maturity. Although the field is well established, the struggle to define and redefine it continues.

One marker of the established nature of Asian American literature and its study has been its overdue but inevitable recognition by cultural institutions not specializing in Pacific Rim or Asian American community issues and artists. Maxine Hong Kingston’s critical success with *Woman Warrior* (1977) and Amy Tan’s phenomenal commercial success

with *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) have registered on the catalogs of large publishing firms and within the curriculum of literature and composition programs across the country. In Eileen Tabios's essay, which opens the section on poetry in *Bold Words*, "Introduction: Absorbing and Being Absorbed by Poetry," she notes Harold Bloom's explanation for why he could find nothing in the 1996 volume of *Best American Poetry*, edited by Adrienne Rich, for his *The Best of the Best American Poetry* (1988–97): "That 1996 anthology . . . seems to me to be a monumental representation for the enemies of the aesthetic who are in the act of overwhelming us.' *Us?* Bloom continues, 'It is of a badness not to be believed, because it follows the criteria now operative: what matters most are race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnic origin, and political purpose of the would-be poet'" (Srikanth and Iwanaga 72; emphasis in original). And yet this defender of the faith of aesthetics against the "badness" of gender, ethnic origin, and the political affixed his name as editor to volumes of collected criticism titled *Asian-American Women Writers* (1997; in the *Women Writers of English and Their Works* series), *Asian-American Writers* (1999), *Amy Tan* (2000), and *Amy Tan's "The Joy Luck Club"* (2002; in the *Modern Critical Views* series). Amy Tan has indeed sold a great many books. Mining the scholarly and commercial possibilities of a previously untapped—or under-published—field of analysis is hard for anyone to resist. Yet readers should be aware that individuals who know the field or even appreciate the values inherent in its founding are not the only ones who are now taking it upon themselves to shape its discourse.² Anyone new to this area of study should remain conscious of the various political positions from which scholarship is written. Even the aesthetics-over-politics position that Bloom takes is itself a political position.

Fortunately, the process of coming of age as a field has generally fostered not only quantity, but also quality in both Asian American artists and the scholars studying Asian American literature. After over thirty years of production of self-identified Asian American literature, it seems only right that scholarship on Asian American literature and culture should also be a firmly established part of American literary studies. Just over ten years ago, I recall hearing Elaine Kim's *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (1982) referred to as "the book," in deference both to its pivotal impact and to the fact that there was very little in-depth critical analysis of Asian American Literature available at that time. Since then we have had Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Amy Ling's *Reading the Literatures of Asian America* (1992), King-Kok Cheung's *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature* (1996), as well as monographs by Stephen H. Sumida (1991), Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (1993), Cheung (1993), Lisa Lowe

(1996), Rachel C. Lee (1999), and Viet Thanh Nguyen (2002), among others. Today these are joined by a range of primary texts, reference works, and various forms of criticism.

With the advent of journals such as *Pedagogy* and the growing recognition across the literary disciplines that a major portion of what we as researchers do is teach, more and more areas of research have somewhat sheepishly begun to focus on the interconnection of research and teaching. The role of pedagogy in Ethnic American literature and Asian American literature in particular can never be forgotten, since the needs of students are what launched this field. Two of the four works that are the primary focus of this review-essay are explicitly useful in terms of the classroom, *Bold Words* for its use as an assigned text for students and *A Resource Guide to Asian American Literature* for its help in preparing teachers for the classroom, especially in its section "Pedagogical Issues and Suggestions."

It seems fitting to start by reviewing the anthology of primary texts, not only because the primary text is where literary scholarship begins, but also because anthologies are a primary way through which Asian American literature has constituted itself. Since the early movement-era anthologies made up largely of student work—such as *Roots: An Asian American Reader* (1971), edited by Tachiki, Wong, Odo, and Wong, or the first *Aiiieeeee!* (1974), edited by Chin, Chan, Inada, and Wong—in a conscious effort to define a literary tradition, anthologies have been key both to developing the pan-ethnic nature of Asian American identity and to getting otherwise overlooked or forgotten artists into print.

Srikanth and Iwanaga's anthology, *Bold Words*, begins with an introduction by Srikanth that explicitly describes the overall organization of the volume and the rationale behind it: "We organized *Bold Words* by genre to underscore the literary value of the writings. We wanted to work against the prevailing tendency to read works by ethnic writers as documents to be mined for the 'authentic' ethnic experience. Thus, we also stayed away from organization by ethnic groups. Similarly, we eschewed a thematic organization, so as to avoid having to frame and suggest limits to the experiences of Asian Americans around identifiable or defined themes" (xvii). The organization of the texts into four sections labeled "Memoir," "Poetry," "Fiction," and "Drama" does indeed put the focus on the texts as literature as opposed to documents of purely sociological or historical interest. This anthology would be a good choice for upper-division and graduate courses in Asian American or multiethnic American literature. The absence of thematic or ethnic categorization—except for the appendices of alternative lists of contents by "Themes and Topics" and "Ethnicity of Authors"—and any pedagogical framework, such as suggested discussion or writing topics, allows

more flexibility to teachers with greater familiarity in the field and with more advanced students who can be counted on to create their own topics and support their ideas with their own research into the cultural and historical contexts of the pieces. A minimalist approach to background information gives this text the potential to straddle the line between the popular and scholarly as it is unencumbered by the pedagogical apparatus attached to many anthologies. It is one book that I would consider giving to non-academics interested in the field, as well as to people looking for models for their own writing. When all four parts of the collection are considered, the reader will find that the mix of contemporary and canonical provides a brief but solid overview of the field.

For teachers not familiar enough with the field (or without the time and resources) to provide information on the historical and cultural context of various pieces in their lectures, I suggest using Lim's *Asian American Literature: An Anthology* (2000). This text is at the other end of the spectrum from Srikanth and Iwanaga's work since it is set up thematically and provides headnotes on each piece, in addition to copious discussion and writing questions that would work well for advanced high school students, as well as composition, and other introductory-level college classrooms. The teacher's edition even goes so far as to provide answers to the discussion questions for those teachers who are themselves just learning about the field. For those looking for a greater depth of specifically contemporary models for their own poetry, I suggest tracking down a copy of Walter K. Lew's *Premonitions: The Kaya Anthology of New Asian North American Poetry* (1995). Despite the passage of the better part of a decade since its appearance, Lew's anthology still maintains its avant-garde edge, and individual selections such as Amitava Kumar's "Iraqi Restaurants" are eerily appropriate today. Unfortunately, its large size and the fact that only the more expensive hardcover edition remains in print today make it a difficult text to use in a classroom, especially a multiethnic literature or composition classroom requiring many additional texts as well. *Premonitions* is perhaps the most visually stunning literary anthology in Asian American—or perhaps American—literature today and explores not only the poetry of its title but also the experimental genre crossings between poetry and performance art or experimental prose narrative forms, such as those of Theresa Cha's *Dictée* (1982).

Three sections of *Bold Words* begin with an overview by a practitioner in the field—Gary Pak on fiction, Eileen Tabios on poetry, and Roberta Uno on drama. The other section, on memoir, begins with an interview of Mina Alexander, the writer of poetry, novels, and nonfiction who is best known for her memoir *Fault Lines* (1992). In their interview, the

two editors ask Alexander about changes in the use of narrative by Asian American authors, including some of the authors included in the anthology, as well as the complexity of writing about an identity that may be splintered by geographical or cultural differences and the potential for agency that both writing and the experience of cultural dissonance might provide.

Some of the readers of *Bold Words*, especially popular or student readers, will be especially appreciative of the choice of practitioners, rather than strictly critics of the genre in question, to introduce each section. Uno's "Introduction: Asian American Theater Awake at the Millennium" offers an extremely informative overview of Asian American performance and its origins. Even a scholar knowledgeable about Asian American literature and its history will gain insight into an art form that tends toward the ephemeral and the highly local in its dissemination. Pak and Tabios both begin with more autobiographical focuses, but also provide brief overviews of the texts that follow in full or in excerpt.

Like Lim's text, *Bold Words* spans a broad historical period. Srikanth notes further in her introduction, "Within each genre, the materials are chronologically organized so as to give to readers a historical picture of the deployment of the genre among Asian American writers. We hope that readers will notice both the changes in and persistence of issues within each genre" (xvii). This organizing principle is especially useful in the first two sections on memoir and fiction. After the interview, the memoir section begins with Carlos Bulosan's "How My Stories Were Written"; however, Bulosan is the only pre-movement or pre-Asian American Studies author included in the memoir section. "Fiction" begins with Sui Sin Far's "In The Land of the Free" (1912), and includes the works of Bulosan, John Okada, Hisaye Yamamoto, and Toshio Mori, which collectively span from the 1930s to the 1950s. "Fiction" is the best section for examining both the founding ancestors and the cutting edge of Asian American writing. On the strength of the first five entries alone, the misconception that Asian American literature did not exist prior to the founding of Asian American literary studies is destroyed. This section truly lives up to the subtitle, *A Century of Asian American Writing*. However, to understand the strength of Asian American literature prior to its entry into academia, a reader must both remember the editor's introductory statement about the chronological structure and do his or her own research as to the chronological context of the various pieces, as neither dates of publication nor headnotes are provided (headnotes would be especially helpful with pieces such as the excerpt from Karen Tei Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* [1990], which is an extremely difficult text to excerpt given its vast assortment of characters and unusual narrative perspective). A curious reader can use the

permissions pages to find dates by which to contextualize the more recent texts, but dates for the older works are unreliable as these works are either in the public domain or have had their copyright renewed sometime after their original publication. Thus, the strength of the chronological organization may be lost to readers not already familiar with Asian American literary history.

The section of *Bold Words* on poetry collects works that seem to come solely from the last third of the century, but even for this relatively short time a reader can see the great changes that have come about in Asian American poetry, particularly in its changing focus and subject matter. The section that concludes the book, "Drama," drops the historical look backward altogether in favor of a survey of currently active playwrights and performance artists. Readers hoping to find a broader historical spectrum, including the work of Wakako Yamauchi and Frank Chin or that of more commercially successful playwrights such as Philip Kan Gotanda or David Henry Hwang, may be disappointed. The editors have chosen pieces by six playwrights or performance artists who are relatively little known outside the locales where their work is produced. As Uno notes, the written text of contemporary performance art "can only partially convey [its] full intent and effect" (328). Nevertheless, this section may be the most informative for readers who are already familiar with Asian American literature, since it presents some exciting new artists whose work would otherwise be inaccessible in either print or video. Although the nature of an anthology regrettably requires that most of the drama and many of the works of fiction and memoir are excerpts rather than complete works, *Bold Words* provides a healthy sampling of some of the early grandfathers and grandmothers of contemporary Asian American literature, as well as a taste of the great diversity of present-day Asian American literary production in terms of genre, style, subject matter, ethnicity, and region.

Unlike *Bold Words*, King-Kok Cheung's *Words Matter: Conversations with Asian American Writers* is not likely to become widely used as a teaching text, except perhaps in some creative writing classrooms. However, both *Bold Words* and *Words Matter* are very appropriate for either a popular or a scholarly audience. In fact, it is difficult to read very far into *Words Matter* and not imagine a young writer who could benefit from the insights abundant in these interviews with twenty Asian American writers from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, engaged in various forms of writing, and from several generations. Actually, since several of the interviewees are creative writers as well as scholars, the book provides insight into the methods, motivations, and influences of more than twenty authors—for example, in poet Emily Porcincula Lawsin's brief description of her childhood experience with Jessica Hagedorn's writing before

her interview with Hagedorn. This is icing on the cake for those of us who will devour this text the way some do interviews of their favorite movie stars in fan magazines.

Beyond the pure pleasure of peeking into the private lives of celebrities and personal idols lies a great deal of material for the researcher or teacher engaged in the major debates surrounding the study of Asian American literature today. Cheung's introduction puts the interviews in context by noting, "At a time when literature is largely defined by the marketplace, the popular media, academe, and various ethnic communities, *Words Matter* invites twenty authors to comment on how they would like their work to be read" (2). She describes the interview process, which was centered around seven sample questions, including "How comfortable are you with the label *Asian American writer*?" "Do you feel a sense of social purpose in your work?" "Does gender, class, or sexuality shape your writing?" and "Which writers do you admire?" (4). These basic questions, modified and combined in a variety of ways and eliciting an amazing range of responses, manage to give a sense of continuity to the volume without being repetitive.

The interviews are roughly organized into four sections, with each section taking a phrase from one of the interviews as a common theme for the section. The first section deals largely with immigrant authors and the complexity of the definition of "home." The interviews in the second section highlight the theme of community engagement and political activism that many authors see as a necessity in their work. Section three emphasizes the limitations that labels place on artists. The final section collects together the interviews of authors who have engaged in a variety of political issues and agendas in their writing, from Burma to Poston, Arizona. Unfortunately, many readers will consult the text for an interview with a particular author on whom they are currently working and miss out on some enlightening discussions by not reading beyond the most canonical or most commonly discussed authors. Even specialists may learn from the interviews with lesser-known authors such as Paul Stephen Lim and S. P. Somtow. When read together, the various interviews create an interethnic, cross-genre, cross-generational dialogue that reveals the complexity of Asian American literary production in a more concrete way than a single critical analysis could provide, no matter how insightful. In fact, researchers and teachers might use some of the points raised in these interviews about topics such as the role of labels, the political in art, the nature of the drive to create, identity formation, and methods of literary composition as starting points for discussion, debate, and further analysis.

The only weakness of *Words Matter* seems to be one common to most academic texts: there is an unfortunate lag in time between the

beginning of the project and publication of the book. Based on references within the interviews, I would say that some are based on single interviews that occurred in the early to mid-1990s. However, all of the bibliographies have been updated for the 2000 publication, and some of the interviews have had additional updating. The early date of the start of this project means that many of the writers who have made the biggest impact in recent years—such as Jhumpa Lahiri or many Southeast Asian American writers—are necessarily left out.

The strongest interviews are those that were apparently part of an ongoing conversation that occurred over a series of meetings or communications. An exception is the interview that closes the volume, King-Kok Cheung's joint interview of old friends Hisaye Yamamoto and Wakako Yamauchi.³ With the interplay not only between the interviewer and subject, but also between the subjects (individuals who have known each other for most of their lives yet still seem to be learning more about each other), this interview vividly captures a moment in time and allows its readers to participate vicariously in a lively and intimate conversation between old friends.

Greenwood Press has been very active in filling the void of reference materials for the study of ethnic literature. Emmanuel S. Nelson's *Asian American Novelists: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook* is part of a quartet of bio-bibliographical critical sourcebooks recently published by Greenwood Press on Asian American literature, including volumes focusing on autobiographers (Huang, *Autobiographers*), poets (Huang, *Poets*), and playwrights (Liu). Although I cannot claim familiarity with this series beyond Nelson's volume on Asian American novelists, I can say that the idea of bringing together information on a variety of writers working within the same discipline and coming from various parts of the large, polymorphous community known as Asian America is a highly useful concept. From my familiarity with Nelson's text, first as a researcher looking for resources on a single author and second as a reviewer attempting a thorough analysis, I would say that every library should have it. That being said, I wish some kind of disclaimer could be attached to the spine of the book, such as "Do not take this as comprehensive or as representative of a canon of Asian American literature."

To his credit, Nelson notes in his introduction, "My purpose in editing this volume is not to help define an Asian American literary canon. I am however, acutely conscious of the fact that a reference work such as this inevitably, even if unintentionally, will be implicated in the process of canon formation. The central objective of this volume is, in fact, to offer reliable, thorough, and up-to-date biographical, bibliographical, and critical information on a range of Asian American novelists" (xi). He goes on to describe the diversity of backgrounds of the

various novelists, making a final point, "However, all of them, on some level, explore the personal and political implications of being Asian in America. In that process they redefine the very idea of America and who, precisely, is an American" (xi). Although making a very good point in general, the statement is awkward given that Nelson has lumped together American and Canadian authors in this volume, and the latter are *not* involved in the same *national* redefinition as their colleagues to the south. Nelson remarks that "the historical and current experiences of Asians in Canada and the United States are substantially similar" (x), yet in his brief but helpful historical overview, detailing events such as the "Immigration Reform Act of 1965" and the emergence of Asian American Studies "on campuses on the West Coast" (ix), he takes the United States as the unnamed generic and provides no details of Canadian history. The inclusion of major authors such as Joy Kogawa and Michael Ondaatje in a text on Asian American authors can be seen as a convenient extra, and there is indeed a great deal of border-crossing between Canada and the United States by authors such as Bharati Mukherjee or Winnifred Eaton. Yet the editor's preface and choice of authors may give the impression that Canada does not possess its own unique history, or that there are not enough Asian American novelists to fill the book's objectives. Simply titling the text "Selected Asian North American Novelists" would have described this volume more accurately. Nelson is right to note how a volume such as his will be read as defining the canon regardless of his intentions. Many instructors resist the rigidity of canonization, a process that originally denied ethnic literature entry into academia, by having students research texts beyond the necessarily limited number on the course syllabus. A reference work such as this is exactly where many students will go to begin their search. Nelson could have remedied this problem, at least for those who read prefaces, by clarifying that his volume is not in any way comprehensive.

Asian American literature has indeed grown beyond the point when all of the writers, even all of those working in a single genre, can be catalogued in one volume. Yet except for the passages cited above, no clear rationale is offered for how the subjects were chosen. Why were these seventy authors selected and why were other authors omitted from the collection? The level of productivity does not seem to have been the deciding factor, since the prolific children's or young adult author Lawrence Yep is left out while Himani Bannerji, the author of one adolescent novel, *Coloured Pictures* (1991), is given five pages and retains a place among many authors of single novels. Despite its inherent importance in literary studies, language does not seem to have been a factor, since sixty-nine of the authors discussed write predominantly in English while one, Susham Bedi, is introduced as "a leading Indian author, writing

in Hindi and living in the United States" (13). The frequency of the novelist's works appearing in critical debates or the classroom does not seem to have been a criterion, since novelists such as Nora Okja Keller, R. Zamora Linmark, Sigrid Nunez, Peter Bacho, Ruth Ozeki, and Gish Jen have been omitted. Even ability is not asserted as a defining element in the selection of authors, since Wentong Ma's entry on novelist Evelyn Chao notes that her work "is not widely publicized and has received no scholarly attention beyond some favorable reviews that are not accessible" (47) and goes on to attack Chao's work apparently for not adopting a Marxist conception of China's history.

The question of selection is a difficult process for the entire field. In "The Fiction of Asian American Literature," Susan Koshy asserts, "The latest Asian American anthologies (even more so than the earlier ones) cannot even assume the existence of common ethnic roots, since they work to include the writings of as many of their different constituent groups as possible" (469). Koshy criticizes the way that many anthologies using the "additive" strategies of inclusion (in the context of her essay, of primary texts) have not ventured to analyze the way in which the additions of texts by new immigrant communities reshape the paradigm of *Asian American* or cogently theorize the differences that that term now encompasses. As Koshy notes, Asian Indians were able to change their U.S. census category from "other white" to "Asian American" only in 1980 (469). With the term *Asian American* now encompassing peoples of not only Hindu but also Islamic culture and belief, Asian American studies and, indeed, the Asian American community as a whole has a range of questions *that have yet to be answered*: Should the expansion of Asian American Studies from its traditional foundations in Far Eastern, largely Confucian-based cultures to South Asian Americans stop arbitrarily at the Pakistani border? In the wake of the destruction of the World Trade Center, the U.S. wars in the Southwestern Asian nations of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the tensions and hate crimes these events have evoked within America, should Asian Americans create ties of kinship or political affiliation with Islamic and/or Arab Americans?⁴ What are the political responsibilities of Asian American activists, leaders, scholars, and artists in tensions between the United States and Islamic peoples?

Nelson's inclusion of twenty-six authors of Chinese ethnicity, ten with Japanese ancestors, seven Korean, five Filipino/a, and nineteen from the South Asian diaspora (with origins in what are now the nations of Pakistan, India, and Sri Lanka) is reflective of the demographics that have shaped and reshaped Asian America. His choice to place an Iranian American author such as Nahid Rachlin in his sourcebook could arguably be seen as reflective of the newly emerging discourse of

Iranian American literature and the potential for that discourse to become a part of the umbrella term *Asian American literature*. However, Nelson seems to leap beyond all ties of cultural or political affiliation when he includes William Peter Blatty, the Lebanese American who gained fame with *The Exorcist* (1971), and Vance Bourjaily, whose father was Lebanese. Yes, Lebanon is technically on the continent of Asia, but its culture seems to be as much defined as a part of Western, Mediterranean culture as it is as a part of Asia. At the same time, Nelson's text wholly ignores the presence of Southeast Asian American novelists such as the frequently taught and discussed Lan Cao or Wendy Law-Yone. My point is not that some writers are somehow less deserving of inclusion in a reference text such as this than other authors, but that the selection process needs to be logically and clearly mapped out so that the user understands what to expect of this particular *selection* of Asian (north) American novelists. I would also argue that academic terms and categories need to remain connected to the real-world communities, experiences, and historical and political dynamics from which they originate or they will lose their meaning.

Like *Words Matter*, *Asian American Novelists* collects works from contributors with varying levels of skill. Yet while Cheung's text evokes an overall sense of continuity and a guiding hand, Nelson's displays not only a haphazard selection process but also a lack of overall quality control. Nonetheless, this text can be helpful for researchers looking for an introduction to individual authors. If aware of its shortcomings, both professional and student researchers can find a fruitful introduction to individual authors, although not an end to their research or an overview of the field.

Sau-ling Cynthia Wong and Stephen H. Sumida's volume, *A Resource Guide to Asian American Literature*, is strikingly different from Nelson's in the way it directly reflects the issues and authors being discussed in classrooms and scholarship on Asian American literature. *A Resource Guide* is specifically useful for teachers as it brings together twenty-one essays on frequently taught individual novels and plays, with four survey essays on other forms of Asian American literature: two on poetry and one each on anthologies and short fiction. With their introduction, Sumida and Wong describe the organization of their volume and the contents of each entry, which contains the following: "Publication . . . [or] . . . Production Information, Overview, Reception, Author's Biographical Background, Historical Context for the Narratives . . . [and/or] . . . the Writing of the Text . . . , Major Themes, Critical Issues, Pedagogical Issues and Suggestions, Intertextual Linkages (indicating texts both Asian American and other than Asian American with which a given title can be compared), Bibliographic Resources, Other Resources (e.g. film

and videos and, in one case, Web sites), and Bibliography (of works consulted in the writing of the unit)" (1). The exhaustive nature of this list typifies the encyclopedic quality of the thorough and systematic coverage provided. The fact that all of this fits within a text of less than 350 pages tells you that the segments of each essay—indeed, each unit—are more a sprint than a leisurely walk through the materials. The pieces on individual prose narratives and drama are more akin to Cliffs Notes than your standard scholarly article, so those expecting a nuanced argument from the authors' own perspectives will be better served by the texts cited in the bibliographies. Yet for many first-time teachers of Asian American literature or students trying to gain information about a text, the individual essays provide an amazing amount of information on a given text in less reading time than is available in the average lunch break. This collection is a godsend for the many high school and college composition teachers across the nation who are being encouraged to use ethnic American texts in their classrooms and yet have little or no training in the teaching or study of that discourse. Through the suggestions for intertextual linkages, this collection gives advice, not only on how one might teach particular works, but also on how to structure a reading list for a whole term. The only thing the text does not give advice on is what anthologies to order, since Wong's essay on anthologies is an overview of the entire field and not a direct report on what volume contains the largest number of texts, either in whole or in excerpt, that are discussed in the rest of the volume.

Many teachers at high schools and colleges with little or no experience with Asian American literature are now being asked to teach texts that reflect diverse student populations. Wong and Sumida's *Resource Guide* (and perhaps a text such as Cheung's *Interethnic Companion* or Lim and Ling's *Reading the Literatures* for a bit more insight into the context of distinct ethnic communities' cultural contexts and literary histories) supplies enough information for even the novice teacher's successful inclusion of Asian American literature into his or her curriculum. More experienced teachers and researchers will find this text useful for the way it collects a great deal of information in a compact form. The bibliographies are separate for each essay (whether focused on an individual text or a whole genre). The distinct bibliographies are ideal for individuals who just need to know about a particular text that they are teaching or researching and thus do not want to wade through irrelevant sources. However, if these individual "Works Cited" sections were combined into a single bibliography, one would have a relatively comprehensive list of what a specialist in the field should hope to know. More experienced teachers may have very different pedagogical practices in mind for various texts, but they will be hard pressed to deny the value in the information and methods described in this volume.

Sumida and Wong directly define their selection process and thus the way their text came to reflect the field in their introduction:

Over the course of ten years we have constructed, and the contributors have filled, a manageable table of contents through a difficult questioning and juggling of the following criteria (which, we emphasize, are *not* listed in order of rank and are *not* applicable in all cases): aesthetic interest; commercial availability; current usage among college instructors; gender and ethnic subgroup variations; historical interest; role in the development of Asian American literature; “track record” of responses by readers, critics, and teachers; potential for generating intertextual linkages and encouraging comparative study; productivity in raising certain critical issues commonly debated in Asian American scholarship; and an elusive quality we call “teachability,” the reality of which we can attest to only by anecdotes. (2)

If one is interested in learning about the “canon” of Asian American literature, I would argue that the editors have found the best way to define such a concept—through the dynamic forces and desires at work in the process of teaching and researching literature. Like *Words Matter, A Resource Guide* has been in the works for quite some time and is thus unable to reflect on (or be reflective of) the texts that have had the most recent impact on the field, particularly literature by the many new Southeast Asian American writers. Yet when the individual units are taken collectively, *A Resource Guide* presents an accurate overview of the field at the beginning of this century.

NOTES

1. Takaki is citing Rich’s essay, “Invisibility in Academe” (1984), which focuses on lesbians in academia, but has pertinent points applicable to many marginalized groups vis-à-vis institutions of scholarship.

2. The mismatch in values is painfully obvious when Bloom uses the introduction to his collection *Amy Tan’s “Joy Luck Club,”* not to discuss the volume, but to decry the fact that one of the essayists claims that Tan has a different take on issues raised by Emerson and Whitman. For Bloom, these great authors have already said everything worth saying, and women’s and minority voices are merely (at best “charming”) restatements of the masters.

3. This single interview no doubt benefited from the fact that Cheung has interviewed Yamamoto before, as seen in the written interchange included in Cheung’s edition of Yamamoto’s *Seventeen Syllables* for Rutgers’ Women Writers Texts and Contexts Series.

4. These crimes have included murder, assault, arson, and other forms of vandalism. The most famous example of these crimes would be the murder of Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh, in Arizona on 15 September 2001. The fact that Sodhi was not even a Muslim emphasizes just how difficult it is to determine and identify hate crimes when even the perpetrators of such crimes themselves misidentify their targets.

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