UCLA
UCLA Previously Published Works

Title
Introduction [to Words Matter]

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9rn6w6cr

ISBN
978-0824822163

Author
Cheung, KK

Publication Date
2000-01-03

Peer reviewed

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

10 *Philip Kan Gotanda* 173
Interview by Robert B. Ito

"It's like putting us in the Chinese laundries"

11 *David Wong Louie* 189
Interview by Stacey Yukari Hirose

12 *Gish Jen* 215
Interview by Rachel Lee

13 *Russell Leong* 233
Interview by Robert B. Ito

14 *Amy Uyematsu* 252
Interview by Scott Kurashige

15 *Li-Young Lee* 270
Interview by James Kyung-Jin Lee

"I'm on the side of literature"

16 *Wendy Law-Yone* 283
Interview by Nancy Yoo and Tamara Ho

17 *Gary Pak* 303
Interview by Brenda Kwon

18 *Karen Tei Yamashita* 320
Interview by Michael S. Murashige

19 *Hisaye Yamamoto and Wakako Yamauchi* 343
Interview by King-Kok Cheung

Contributors 383

Index 387

Introduction

KING-KOK CHEUNG

My work as an activist . . . is inextricable from what I write.
—Janice Mirikitani

The whole enterprise of writing for me is spiritual.
—Li-Young Lee

You write because you have no choice.
—Wendy Law-Yone

What does it mean to be an Asian American writer? Is it the same as being a writer of Asian descent? Or just a writer? As the epigraphs to this introduction demonstrate, the authors interviewed in this collection have remarkably different literary compulsions. Even more varied are their styles, their sensibilities, and the settings of their stories, which include Burma, Brazil, England, India, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Sudan, Thailand, and Vietnam as well as California, Hawai'i, Kansas, and New York. Yet in this country these authors are all designated as *Asian American writers* by academics, publishers, the media—and in this volume.

Like most artists of color, authors of Asian ancestry in the

United States often face a host of assumptions and expectations. Because their number is still relatively small, those who draw inspiration from their experiences as members of a minority are often seen as speaking for their ethnic groups. Because their work is frequently treated as ethnography by mainstream reviewers, many in the Asian American communities hold them accountable for an authentic "representation." They also confront persistent stereotypes suggesting that Asian Americans may make top-notch engineers or kung fu fighters but surely not poets, playwrights, or novelists. Even writers whose works are widely read may feel ghettoized as second-class citizens in the publishing marketplace, which may accept them as good Asian American writers but still not regard them as good writers, period.

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 works to be read. They are asked to speak openly about their aesthetics, their politics, and the difficulties they have encountered in pursuing a writing career: disapproval of parents who press them to engage in more practical pursuits; cultural prohibition against exposing oneself or one's family; the absence of literary predecessors; self-contempt associated with race, poverty, gender, or sexuality; or the toll exacted by the ravages of war, exclusion, and internment. They address, among other issues, the expectations attached to the label *Asian American writer,* the burden of representation shouldered by the ethnic artist, and the different demands of "mainstream" and ethnic audiences.

This project started as an experiment on my part to bridge research and teaching, to narrow the gap between theory and lived experience, and to connect literary scholarship—a discourse that can sometimes wax abstruse and impersonal—with what my students find compelling about the literature. With the exception of Zainab Ali's dialogue with Meena

Alexander, my exchange with Paul Stephen Lim, and my conversation with Hisaye Yamamoto and Wakako Yamauchi, the interviews were conducted by graduate students from the English Department and the Asian American Studies Center of the University of California, Los Angeles. Space limitations have meant that only a small proportion of the growing number of Asian American writers have been interviewed. For the most part the selection was made by the graduate students themselves and was governed by their own lines of inquiry. I merely ensured that the volume contain a mix of poets, playwrights, and fiction writers and include immigrant and American-born authors of different ethnic origins. Time and cost of travel account for the preponderance of subjects who reside in California. We hope that future volumes can make up for the imbalance.

The special relationship between interviewer and interviewee is a distinctive feature of this collection. The graduate students are thoroughly familiar with the works of the writers interviewed and are therefore capable of asking informed questions and eliciting precious comments on specific texts. Because most of these students are considerably younger than the writers whom they are interviewing, the interviews at times come across as a probing dialogue between generations. Thus, the collection not only offers the writers an opportunity to intervene in academic debates but also gives voice to the students, whose insights inform their introduction of the individual authors and most of the questions. Many of the student interviewers are aspiring writers or literary scholars in part seeking guidance from their chosen interviewees. I sense that their passion and persistence have helped draw out some otherwise taciturn subjects and deepen the conversation. In the time that has elapsed since the interviews took place, some of the interviewers have themselves become instructors of Asian American literature or published authors of poetry and fiction.

In addition to encouraging the writers to discuss their work, the interviewers were urged to modify and expand on the following list of sample questions:

1. How did you become a writer? Was your family encouraging or discouraging along the way?

2. How comfortable are you with the label *Asian American writer?* Do you feel limited by such a term, or do you draw strength from it? Are there, in your view, particular obstacles or opportunities for writers so designated?

3. What kind of audience do you have in mind? How would you characterize the reception of your work? Do you feel a split between "mainstream" and "ethnic" readers?

4. Do you feel a sense of social purpose in your work? Do you believe in art for art's sake?

5. Does gender, class, or sexuality shape your writing? If so, in what way?

6. Which writers do you admire? Who have had the strongest influence on your work?

7. (For immigrant writers only:) Where do you consider to be your "home"? Do you feel an internal tug-of-war between your Asian homeland and the United States? Do you consider yourself to be an (Asian) American writer or a writer in exile?

The writers' divergent viewpoints—appreciating or recoiling from the label *Asian American,* claiming or disclaiming an "American" identity, accepting or rejecting social obligations—can certainly contribute to current rethinking within the field of Asian American studies. Historically, the appellation *Oriental* was used in North America both for peoples across the Pacific and for Asian inhabitants of the "New World." *Asian American,* on the other hand, is a self-designation that came into currency in the late 1960s in the wake of the civil rights and black power movements and that accen-

tuates the American status of immigrants from Asia and their descendants. The term grew out of the frustration felt by many American-born citizens of Asian extraction at being treated as perpetual foreigners in the United States, even if their roots in this country go back several generations. Such discriminatory treatment—along with Orientalist tendencies that exoticize Asian objects, customs, and persons—has also engendered in many Asian Americans an ambivalence about their Asian heritage. Because the dominant perception of what constitutes *American* is white, mainstream, and Western, Asian Americans' desire to reclaim a distinctive ethnic tradition can seem at odds with their desire to be recognized as fully American.

The term *Asian American literature* first came into being when the establishment of an Asian American cultural tradition was part of the larger political struggle to gain visibility and advance social justice. According to Glenn Omatsu, in the late 1960s, "writers, artists, and musicians were 'cultural workers,' usually closely associated with communities, and saw their work as 'serving the people'" (1994, 28). Writing by Asian Americans coalesced around the theme of claiming an American (as opposed to an Asian) identity. In *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* (1974), Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong set forth one of the earliest and most influential definitions of Asian American literature, stressing American nativity and a sensibility that is "neither Asian nor white American" (1974/1983, xxi) as the foremost criteria for such writing. But their criteria have subsequently been questioned by scholars who take issue with their masculinist bias, their marginalization of immigrant writers, and their allegedly prescriptive definition of what constitutes Asian American literature.

The editors of *Aiiieeeee!* considered "emasculation" to be one of the most damaging stereotypes about Asian Americans: "Good or bad, the stereotypical Asian is nothing

as a man. At worst, the Asian-American is contemptible because he is womanly, effeminate, devoid of all the traditionally masculine qualities of originality, daring, physical courage, and creativity" (Chin et al. 1974/1983, xxx). Because they saw this affront as bound up with the suppression of a distinctive vernacular, they resolved to reclaim a specifically masculine ethnopoetics. Their androcentric solution to racist representation has been challenged by feminist critics who take the editors to task for their preoccupation with rehabilitating Asian American manhood, their homophobia, and their classification of desirable attributes as masculine (see Cheung 1990; Kim 1990; Ling 1990).

Such efforts, however, had little effect. Chin et al. made good on their commitment to re-creating a "recognized style of Asian American manhood" (1974/1983, xxxviii) in *The Big Aiiieeeee!* (Chan et al. 1991), which presents selected Chinese and Japanese heroic epics as the sources of the "Asian heroic tradition" and maintains that "authentic" Asian American writing must hark back to the ethos of these heroic tales. Three famous Chinese American writers—David Henry Hwang, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Amy Tan—are hotly denounced as "fake" by Frank Chin (Chin 1991, 2), who attributes their "popularity among whites" to their distortion and fabrication of Chinese lore. Owing to Chin's stature and influence in Asian American literary circles, his judgment is sometimes taken as definitive of the dichotomy between ethnic and mainstream audiences where evaluation of Asian American writers is concerned (although Hwang, Kingston, and Tan have their Asian American admirers, too).

Demographic flux has meanwhile extended Asian American literary boundaries beyond the compass of works by American-born writers of mostly Chinese and Japanese ancestry. Largely as a result of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which abolished quotas favoring European nations, the number of Asian immigrants has risen so sharply that it is

no longer practical to insist on the primacy of American nativity. Furthermore, because of the diverse national origins of the new immigrants, the scope of the term *Asian American literature* has now been broadened to include writings by people of Bangladeshi, Burmese, Cambodian, Chinese, Filipino, Indian, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Laotian, Nepali, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Thai, and Vietnamese descent.

Along with this expansion came shifts in critical paradigms. One of the earlier tenets of Asian American studies was "claiming America"—highlighting the presence and contributions of people of Asian ancestry in this country. But today many immigrant writers and scholars prefer to maintain affiliation with their Asian homeland as well. The implications of claiming an American as opposed to a "diasporic" or "exilic" identity have been the subject of considerable scholarly attention. While some worry that asserting a diasporic identity may reinforce the dominant perceptions of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners, others argue that "claiming America" only bolsters U.S. hegemony and squelches the heterogeneous concerns and sensibilities of different Asian American groups (see Gonzalez and Campomanes 1997; Cheung 1997; Koshy 1998; Lim 1997; Lowe 1991; San Juan 1995; Sumida 1997; Wong 1995).

The most radical challenge to the earlier conceptions of Asian American literature has to do with whether this literature should be "defined" at all. Given the ideological genesis of the term *Asian American*—a self-designation that implies a certain political awareness—and its subsequent use as a neutral descriptive label, as in the U.S. census, the perspectives of those who expect Asian American literature to be socially dedicated and those who believe literature to be essentially personal and experimental inevitably clash. While many scholars and students continue to expect Asian American writers to furnish material that reflects ethnic experiences, some writers have begun to balk at these assumptions. Most vocal in

deploring any prescriptive formulations of Asian American literature is Garrett Hongo, who complains that writers of Asian descent are often subject to double censorship: from the mainstream society, which discourages minority protest, and from ethnic communities, which demand that these writers adopt "a predominantly political or sociological construction of Asian American identity" (1993, xxxiv). Furthermore, given the publishing establishment's tendency to value Asian American literature primarily as ethnography and the cultural nationalist emphasis in Asian American studies, works by writers who venture beyond issues of ethnicity tend to fall by the wayside—neglected by both the center and the margins. As Amy Uyematsu asks, "Why do only certain themes qualify as 'Asian American literature'?" (p. 265).

The continuing debate over the social responsibility as opposed to the artistic autonomy of the Asian American writer is evident in the recent controversy over the work of Lois-Ann Yamanaka. For two successive years, 1997 and 1998, the literary awards committees of the Association for Asian American Studies selected one of her books as the recipient of the fiction prize, but, largely because of protest from the Filipino Caucus, which found that her work denigrates Filipino Americans, her award was twice revoked. Defenders of Yamanaka criticize her detractors for failing to discern the difference between author and fictional narrator, calling for an end to tribal policing, while her critics consider such artistic defense patronizing and condescending and believe that her work reinforces the existing ethnic hierarchy and further divides the local community. The incident acutely reminds us that "words matter," not just to writers, but also to their readers, that words carry both artistic nuances and material consequences.

Never have the words of Asian American writers reached as many people as they do today. The popularity of works by Americans of Asian descent has skyrocketed in the last few

decades, attracting non-Asian as well as Asian readers and making inroads into the American curriculum. High school and college instructors increasingly feel the need to include these works in their course offerings. Nor is the interest confined to the United States. Conferences on Asian American literature have been held in Berlin, Kyoto, Paris, and Taipei, and the number of overseas specialists in the field is mounting.

Despite widespread national and international interest, source material about these writers is still scarce. Most readers and instructors are familiar with only a few "big" names, such as the ones denounced by Chin; the tremendous difference among authors of various national origins and generations lumped together under the label *Asian American writers* is often overlooked. Critics, too, have a difficult time keeping pace with the expanding field. Although scholarship on Asian American literature has grown considerably, the range of authors covered is still quite limited. Furthermore, historical and biographical contextualization as well as close literary analysis have currently taken a backseat to theoretical discourse; when literary texts are tackled at all, they are often filtered through or submerged in postmodernist, postcolonialist, or Marxist critical jargon incomprehensible to lay readers. In the light of the dearth of readily accessible secondary material, this collection provides a valuable firsthand introduction to twenty writers. It enables general readers and instructors unfamiliar with this literature to become acquainted with a variety of authors and to develop an interest in their works. Specialists in the field, who have for some time tackled vexing questions of definition, identity, national allegiance, and audience, will find this volume indispensable.

The interviews presented in *Words Matter* were conducted against the backdrop of the rapid reconfiguration of Asian American studies, and American studies in general, to reflect global migrations and the diverse populations of the United

States. Besides introducing twenty writers of Asian descent and providing a forum for them to articulate their perspectives on knotty issues confronting Asian Americanists, this collection serves several other purposes. The writers' comments on their own texts should enrich the literary appreciation of students and instructors and also open up new avenues of interpretation for critics and scholars. For example, despite her problematic equation of assimilation and Americanization, Gish Jen's discussion of "good" and "bad" assimilation offers a useful angle for analyzing *Typical American*, which to date has been seen largely as a satire of the American dream; and Myung Mi Kim's observations regarding the confluence of English and Korean in her poetry take us beyond thematic concerns about crossing cultures to linger on linguistic inflections. Some of these interviews also double as oral history about the internment of Japanese Americans (Yamamoto and Yamauchi), Burma or Myanmar under totalitarianism (Law-Yone), the Philippines under American colonialism (Hagedorn, Lim), the Vietnam War (Hayslip), and the rise of the Asian American movement in the sixties and seventies (Leong, Mirikitani, Robles, Uyematsu).

This assemblage of the voices of twenty authors—individuals with unique histories and perspectives, thematic concerns and aesthetic priorities—should effectively dispel any stereotypes about people of Asian descent and testify to the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of representing the diverse groups presently collected under one heading. Can the label *Asian American* continue to bring together the many constituent groups it is meant to encompass, and is solidarity possible among them? This question is the flip side of the one raised by those critics of multiculturalism who worry about the "balkanization" of America. The multiethnic dimensions of Asian American literature and its crisis of identity also speak to the broader concerns of multicultural American studies. In

the contention about American and diasporic identities can be found a microcosm of larger academic and political debates over diversity and over the inclusion and exclusion of immigrant and refugee groups. These issues underlie the very basis on which literature, culture, and art are produced, taught, and critiqued. Although Asian American literature is still seen as a subcurrent of American literature, it is fast entering the mainstream, reshaping the canon.

Some of these concerns are specifically highlighted in the titles given to the four parts of the book. "Where do we live now—here or there?"—a question posed by Jessica Hagedorn and used as the title of part 1—captures the physical or psychological shuttling between an Asian homeland and the United States that some immigrant writers have experienced. The displacement that Hagedorn found confusing when she first came to the United States she now finds exhilarating: "I'm almost happiest . . . in an airport, in between flights. The sense of a million worlds meeting in an airport." Paul Stephen Lim—another writer from the Philippines, albeit of Chinese descent—confesses that he never really feels "at home" anywhere: "When I am lecturing in the classroom at the University of Kansas, I sometimes find myself addressing the students as 'you Americans.' . . . I frequently talk about 'Us Chinese,' but never about 'Us Filipinos.'" Where Hagedorn believes that "home is in [her] head and includes forever that house in Santa Mesa," Lim (consciously echoing Carlos Bulosan) thinks that "home is where the heart is" and that his "is in America." S. P. Somtow, who is Thai by birth but who has lived in England, Holland, Japan, and divers cities in the United States, compares himself to a "chameleon" that "existed on the perimeters of each culture." He believes that his travels have a direct bearing on his choice of genre: "One of the most disorienting things of my early life was my discovery that there was no particular culture that was the way it had to

be. . . . Because of that, when I started writing, it tended to be in the science fiction field, where you could simply create new cultures by 'stealing' a little of this and that, mixing them up."

Meena Alexander believes that it is precisely the act of crossing national boundaries that gives rise to a sense of ethnicity: "If I were living in Kerala, I wouldn't need to be Indian, I wouldn't need to be Asian. You exist as that ethnic category only . . . in a public sphere, where it's under challenge, where you're marked." For Myung Mi Kim, the sense of being between cultures permeates the language of her poetry: "I am constantly aware of this particular English I participate in—perhaps an English that behaves like Korean, an English shaped by a Korean. The space between the two languages is a site of mutation between an English and a Korean." Le Ly Hayslip faces perhaps the most acute reminder of her diasporic identity: "I am between East and West because I do not belong here and do not belong there." She recalls the traumatic experience of watching on television the destruction of her homeland during the Vietnam War and thinking to herself, "God, that could be my people, my village"; but "the Americans around me think I'm stupid because 'the Vietnamese are our enemy.'"

Janice Mirikitani's words "We came into the circle of recovery"—used as the title of part 2—express the need felt by those who have suffered personal or collective injuries to come together as a group or a community and to inspire social change through the spoken or written word. Mirikitani discloses how she comes to terms with the sexual molestation she experienced as a child when she tries to help other victims of sexual abuse. She believes that "a good poem is a good poem if it works," if it touches others. Chitra Divakaruni, president of Maitri (a domestic violence help line for South Asians in the Bay Area), also helps women who have undergone "a cycle of violence," women whose life stories sometimes enter her own fiction and poetry.

Al Robles deplores the dislocation and the dispersal of the Manongs, the Issei, the African Americans, the poor, the prostitutes, and all those who used to inhabit the San Francisco I-Hotel—where "the birth of our people and the community," "the poetry, the celebration," all were "woven together"—before it was torn down by land developers. He believes that poetry and other art must bear witness to "the wound" of the I-Hotel and keep alive the communal spirit. Playwright Philip Kan Gotanda laments the internalized racism of Asian American actors who accept demeaning roles; he is also troubled by those in the Japanese American community who buy into "the idea of being a second-class citizen" and by mainstream media that continue to shut out or distort Asian images. For him, the only road to recovery "is to speak out, to say what you have to say . . . to create new works—put your own works out there."

"It's like putting us in the Chinese laundries"—a simile used by David Wong Louie—conveys the frustration felt by the writers interviewed in part 3 (as well as by many others) at being invidiously categorized as *ethnic* or *Asian American* writers. "I think that translates in some people's minds as African American does still for some people—as something less than, something not as good, something inferior," Louie observes. Gish Jen explains that when she opens *Typical American* with the words "This is an American story," she is redefining the American tradition as well as making claims for her book: "As an Asian American I understood that I was going to be ghettoized, and I wanted to get out." On being referred to as an *apprentice* by the editors of the *New England Review,* Russell Leong comments that they were probably using the term to imply that "we are traveling beyond our ethnicity and learning English, or learning how to write. . . . Very patronizing." Leong himself believes that "writers of color in America help validate American writing"; hence, "the editors are the apprentices because they're learning from us."

The tendency to ghettoize is not confined to white publishers, according to Amy Uyematsu: "There are a few places where I've submitted—Asian American journals or ethnic journals—where, if I didn't do something that was specifically on a racial theme, my work wouldn't get considered." She also suspects that, when her editors asked her to remove poems about Native Americans from the manuscript of *30 Miles from J-Town,* "it was because . . . I was venturing into territory where I shouldn't be." However, "as a poet I'm going to write about everything." Li-Young Lee is most emphatic about his desire not to be tagged as *Asian American:* "That classification can bring attention to Asian American writers who are overlooked because they're Asian American. But, ultimately, if we're not careful, it can be a prison because in America we have poets and then we have Asian American poets. . . . It's so important for an artist of any kind *not* to identify with a group." Lee wishes to "live in a state of 'nobodyhood,' . . . to live a life without paradigms."

Wendy Law-Yone resists ethnic classification and conventional historiography. "History, after all," she notes, "is the version of the victors. . . . Literature, on other hand, documents the version of the conquered. I'm on the side of literature"—a tag line that we take as the title of part 4. The characters created by the authors interviewed in this part are a far cry from traditional historical heroes, yet we are made to see the dreams, ideals, and strengths residing in these failed or unfulfilled lives and offered a deeper understanding of a given time and place than that afforded by official chronicles. Speaking of the protagonist of *Irrawaddy Tango,* Law-Yone reveals: "I like to focus on stories about failure. . . . [Tango] is not a successful immigrant in the generally understood sense. She does not become a CEO. But holding on to the painful past allows her . . . to return to her homeland and seek . . . Major Restitution." Gary Pak also roots for the disenfranchised. Asked about the maligned gay protagonist in

"A Toast for Rosita," a story in *The Watcher of Waipuna,* he replies: "The demeaning part came from the other characters looking at Rosita. Rosita was strong. The story was told from the kids' point of view. . . . Yet they were able to see Rosita through a much fresher perspective, by seeing what he did, and the honesty and pureness in his heart." Pak also reveals that the title of his recent novel—*A Ricepaper Airplane*—symbolizes the aspirations of a Korean American pioneer who dreams of going back to Korea in a plane of his own making: "Some of these dreams have been huge failures . . . [but] we have to keep on with those dreams."

Big dreams likewise turn into magnificent failures in Karen Yamashita's *Brazil-Maru,* which uncovers layers of buried history. Within the bigger picture delineating the little-known Japanese emigration to Brazil, *Brazil-Maru* zooms in on the Japanese men who opted out of the middle class to establish a commune and the Japanese women who made up the invisible workforce that sustains communal living. Similarly, in *Tropic of Orange,* Yamashita unfurls the seamy side of U.S. history, such as the dispossession of the urban poor and the exploitation of Mexican labor. Like Law-Yone, however, Yamashita prefers literature to history: "With straight history, you . . . couldn't express the emotion. You couldn't express those extra things that illustrate history. . . . I also wanted to bring in a feeling for the sense of place, that scene, the smell." The veteran writers Hisaye Yamamoto and Wakako Yamauchi both excel in capturing that special feeling. They often depict lives on the fringe of mainstream annals, but their stories are based on lived experiences, their own or others'. Yamauchi believes in telling "whatever story you have to tell"—"as long as it's honest, it's valid." Yamamoto desists from giving any advice on writing: "If people have this urge to write, they will, no matter what; wild horses can't stop them." The twenty writers interviewed here all share this unbridled impulse, although they charge in different directions.

While the part titles highlight some salient attributes and concerns of the writers, they are not meant to downplay the distinct personalities of the authors, who disagree as often as they agree with each other. Nor are they meant to limit the breadth and depth of what readers can take away from the interviews, each of which covers a wide range of topics. Readers will naturally discover for themselves many other choice morsels. As Hayslip puts it, "We need all kinds of tastes. We need all kinds of thinking to make the world go round. The choice is not up to me. It's up to the reader."

Acknowledgments

This project was made possible by funding from the UCLA Asian American Studies Center. I am particularly grateful to Don Nakanishi for his continuous support; to Russell Leong for his trust, guidance, detailed comments, and inspiring suggestions; to Brian Niiya for his encyclopedic answers to my miscellaneous queries regarding Japanese Americans; to Lynn Itagaki for her genius and devotion in overseeing the final stages of the manuscript; and to Dominika Ferens for her intelligent and exhaustive research and editorial assistance. I also thank Joseph H. Brown for his meticulous copyediting and the two readers for the University of Hawai'i Press for their encouragement and constructive criticism.

Works Cited

Chan, Jeffery Paul, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong, eds. *The Big Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature.* New York: New American Library–Meridian, 1991.

Cheung, King-Kok. "The Woman Warrior versus the Chinaman Pacific: Must a Chinese American Critic Choose between Feminism and Heroism?" In *Conflicts in Feminism,* ed. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller. New York: Routledge, 1990.

———. "Re-viewing Asian American Literary Studies." In *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature,* ed. King-Kok Cheung. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Chin, Frank. "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake." In *The Big Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature,* ed. Jeffery Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong. New York: New American Library–Meridian, 1991.

Chin, Frank, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong, eds. *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (1974). Rev. ed. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1983.

Gonzalez, N. V. M., and Oscar V. Campomanes. "Filipino American Literature." In *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature,* ed. King-Kok Cheung. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Hongo, Garrett, ed. *The Open Boat: Poems from Asian America.* New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1993.

Kim, Elaine. "'Such Opposite Creatures': Men and Women in Asian American Literature." *Michigan Quarterly Review* 29, no. 1 (1990): 68–93.

Koshy, Susan. 1998. "The Fiction of Asian American Literature." *Yale Journal of Criticism* 9, no. 2 (1996): 315–346.

Lim, Shirley Geok-lin. "Immigration and Diaspora." In *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature,* ed. King-Kok Cheung. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Ling, Amy. *Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry.* New York: Pergamon, 1990.

Lowe, Lisa. "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences." *Diaspora* 1, no. 1 (1991): 24–43.

Omatsu, Glenn. "The 'Four Prisons' and the Movements of Liberation: Asian American Activism from the 1960s to the 1990s." In *The State of Asian America: Activism and Resistance in the 1990s,* ed. Karin Aguilar–San Juan. Boston: South End, 1994.

San Juan, E., Jr. "In Search of Filipino Writing: Reclaiming Whose America?" In *The Ethnic Canon: Histories, Institutions, and Interventions,* ed. David Palumbo-Liu. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995.

INTERSECTIONS

Asian and Pacific American
Transcultural Studies

Russell C. Leong
General Editor

Words Matter

CONVERSATIONS WITH ASIAN AMERICAN WRITERS

Edited by King-Kok Cheung

University of Hawai'i Press
Honolulu

in association with UCLA Asian American Studies Center
Los Angeles

© 2000 University of Hawai'i Press
All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America
05 04 03 02 01 00 5 4 3 2

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Words matter : conversations with Asian American writers / edited by King-Kok Cheung
p. cm. – (Intersections)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-8248-2134-3 (acid-free paper). —
ISBN 0-8248-2216-1 (pbk. : acid-free paper).
1. American literature—Asian American authors—History and criticism—Theory, etc. 2. Authors, American—20th century—Interviews. 3. Asian Americans—Intellectual life. 4. Asian Americans in literature. 5. Asian Americans—Interviews. 6. Authorship. I. Cheung, King-Kok, 1954– II. Series: Intersections (Honolulu, Hawaii)
PS153.A84W67 2000
810.9'895'0904—dc21 99-36654
CIP

University of Hawai'i Press books are printed on acid-free paper and meet the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Council on Library Resources.

Designed by Barbara Pope Book Design

Printed by The Maple-Vail Book Manufacturing Group

Contents

Introduction 1
King-Kok Cheung

"Where do we live now—here or there?"

1 *Jessica Hagedorn* 21
Interview by Emily Porcincula Lawsin

2 *Paul Stephen Lim* 40
Interview by King-Kok Cheung

3 *S. P. Somtow* 58
Interview by Rahpee Thongthiraj

4 *Meena Alexander* 69
Interview by Zainab Ali and Dharini Rasiah

5 *Myung Mi Kim* 92
Interview by James Kyung-Jin Lee

6 *Le Ly Hayslip* 105
Interview by Khanh Ho

"We came into the circle of recovery"

7 *Janice Mirikitani* 123
Interview by Grace Kyungwon Hong

8 *Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni* 140
Interview by Dharini Rasiah

9 *Al Robles* 154
Interview by Darlene Rodrigues