Home Is Where the Heart Is?
Identity and Belonging in Asian American Literature

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I. Introduction

Asian American literature constitutes a significant and growing aspect of U.S.-American literature. In Asian American literature, identity always has been an important issue. Even though much time has passed since the nation-building era of the 1960s and 1970s, when the term "Asian American" was coined and questions of identity were passionately discussed, the topic is still relevant. Cultural nationalism and stereotyping as well as demographic, political, and historical shifts have greatly influenced and shaped the identity discourses and turned them into interesting sites of debate and contemplation on the politics of representation.

The following work describes and analyzes the main tendencies in the theoretical discussion about concepts of identity and belonging in Asian America, as well as their reflection in literature. Special attention will be paid to the changing conception of identity since the 1960s. While the subject of identity in Asian American literature has been dealt with relatively often, little research has been done on the many facets of its development, even though this development is important for understanding the various works and their reception. Yet, neither do I intend to reduce the works at hand to the subject of identity and belonging, nor do I wish to isolate them from the rest of the literature of the United States. Rather, I believe that a thorough understanding of these issues and the debates surrounding them will help make these works accessible in many different ways and thus open up new contextualizations.

My argument is advanced in seven chapters. Chapter I gives a brief overview of various theories concerning the influence of culture on identity formation. Culture and history are the main factors for the construction of collective and personal identities. They serve as points of departure for how one perceives others and how one sees oneself. In cultural contexts, stereotypes and misconceptions are created, and in culture they can be deconstructed again.
Chapter II will show the development of identity discourses in Asian American literature, from the cultural nationalism of the late 1960s/early 1970s to the current ideas of de-nationalization. In the third chapter, I will discuss several literary works representative of different conceptions of Asian American identity. John Okada's *No-No Boy* (1957) and Louis Chu's *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1961) will be analyzed as reflections of an early concept of Asian American identity in literature.\(^1\) Maxine Hong Kingston's novels *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and *China Men* (1980), as well as some of Kingston's thematic predecessors, are then treated as works advocating newer ideas about Asian American identity and writing.\(^2\) This is followed by a short excursion into contemporary Chinese and Japanese American writing in the fifth chapter. Finally, in the last two chapters, the reflection of identity and belonging in recent Korean American writing and art will be evaluated. The cultural output of Korean Americans has increased enormously in the past ten years. Since Korean Americans are – compared to Chinese and Japanese Americans – a relatively young Asian American group, their works have not gained as much attention as those of the latter groups. In my chapter on Korean American literature and art, I will show the specific features of Korean American cultural productions, including their rootedness in the Asian American tradition.

Naturally, this survey of identity and belonging in Asian American literature cannot be exhaustive, and the works chosen delineate but a very small fraction of the material available. I have entirely left out the exciting realm of Filipino/a American literature. Due to the colonization of the Philippines by the Spanish and later the Americans, and because of the special relationship between the United States and the Philippines as a result of its occupation, Filipino/a American literature is extremely interesting, touching upon topics such as identity and belonging, but also

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postcolonialist issues. Similarly, South Asian and Vietnamese American works could certainly be valuable to look at in this context. I have excluded these, however, in order not to exceed the dimensions of this work.

Other concessions I have had to make include limiting the focus to prose narratives, even though many excellent poetry and dramatic works written by Asian Americans have been published. I also left out such highly interesting topics as Asian American art and cinema (except for a digression into Korean American art). I furthermore will not discuss in detail literature written before the late 1950s, even though Asian American literature arose as early as the mid-nineteenth century. In these works, however, the United States are often entirely absent. They are written by authors who consider themselves exclusively Asian. As "ambassadors of goodwill" they attempt to explain their culture or the culture of their ancestors to a white audience. Some of them do not engage their American experiences at all and solely write about their home countries. One of the few pre-1950s writers who explicitly deals with the subject of identity is Sui Sin Far (Edith Eaton). She, therefore, needs to be mentioned here at least briefly. Sui Sin Far (1867-1914) was half-Chinese and half-English and lived in the United States and Canada. Being partly white and partly Asian, she encountered many difficulties in her life. She nevertheless appreciated both of her backgrounds and, in spite of all the problems, never tried to deny either

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5 Especially NAATA, a San Francisco-based company specialized in the distribution of films by Asian Americans, has contributed greatly to the popularity of Asian American cinema (www.naatanet.org). Much work needs to be done, however, before Asian American cinema finds its way into the American mainstream cinema, where the depiction of Asians and other people of color is often still quite racist. On racism in American cinema, see, among others, Robert Lee's work.

6 Examples of such early Asian American literature are Lee Yan Phou's *When I Was a Boy in China* (1887), Etsu Sugimoto's *A Daughter of the Samurai* (1925), or Lin Yutang's famous *My Country and My People* (1937). For a
one of them. She was often forced to reflect on her identity, and hence she often included the question of identity in her writings. Her interesting life and work, as well as that of her sister, who - in complete contrast to Sui Sin Far - wrote orientalized novels under a Japanese pseudonym, would be worth a closer examination. Another early Asian American writer who wrote about turning American, Younghill Kang, will be looked at in the chapter on Korean American writing.

I am well aware of the fact that it is difficult to speak of "Asian American" identity at all because of the extreme diversity of the Asian American population in history, culture, language, and tradition. At the same time, in spite of the fact that the writers and artists I will examine are from different Asian American groups or of different generations, they do share commonalities such as the experience of being immigrants or being descendants of immigrants. Additionally, as members of a "visible minority," many of these groups face(d) racism, and, of course, have struggled to find or define an identity and a "home" for themselves. These differences and similarities respectively speak both against and for the use of the label "Asian American," a label which is both political and ambiguous. I will use the term "Asian American identity" in the way proposed by Elaine Kim and Lisa Lowe. This term, as is later explained, serves as an "organizing tool." I will include many Asian American groups in order to be able to choose from a broad selection of great literature, but will try not to neglect the differences between them. Asian American literature is thus defined here from an ethnic and geographic point of view and includes all prose written in English by any person of Asian origin who lives or lived in the United States.

In spite of the difficulties that might arise when analyzing works by members of different Asian American groups, the approach of looking at the concepts of Asian American identity and belonging further recommends itself because it

detailed account of early Asian American literature, see, for example, Kim, Asian American Literature 23-57.

More information on the two sisters can be found, for example, in Amy Ling, Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry (New York: Pergamon, 1990) 21-55.
examines these concepts in single Asian American works and outlines their evolution in Asian American literature in general.

Since identity, fiction, and history are often closely intertwined in Asian American literature and "[y]ellow history is still the great yellow mystery,"8 I will add historical information whenever appropriate.

A. Identities

Just now everybody wants to talk about 'identity.' As a keyword in contemporary politics it has taken on so many different connotations that sometimes it is obvious that people are not even talking about the same thing. One thing at least is clear – identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty.9

Even though more than ten years have passed since Kobena Mercer pointed out the strong presence of the topic, his observation still bears much truth. In the age of globalization, transnationalization, of wars, economic and political instability, "in the age of the refugee, dislocated persons, mass immigration,"10 identity – with all its different connotations – has become an inescapable issue.

The cause for the many different connotations mentioned by Mercer lies in the very nature of identity: similar to race and ethnicity, identity is a construct.11 The identity of a person consists of various aspects, fixed and shifting, self-assigned and assigned by others. Thus, it can vary depending on the time, the point of view, and the physical and intellectual location of the defining/defined person.

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Culture, history, and ethnicity are three central and closely intertwined aspects which influence identity formation. Ethnic identities are often created in narratives based on culture and history. Kathryn Woodward writes about the role of culture in the definition of identities: "Identities are produced, consumed and regulated within culture – creating meanings through symbolic systems of representation about the identity positions which we might adopt." Edward Said offers a similar opinion, even though he looks at it from the other side: "We live of course in a world not only of commodities but also of representation, and representations – their production, circulation, history, and interpretation – are the very element of culture."

Stuart Hall defines two different models of what he calls "cultural" identity. "The first defines 'cultural identity' in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self,' hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves,' which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common." In this model, shared history and cultural codes form a frame of reference, a feeling of belonging to "one people." This model may be empowering for those sharing similarities, but it is also exclusionist and dangerously flirts with cultural nationalism. Hall's description of this model of cultural identity is almost identical to the common definition of "ethnic identity/ethnicity." In contrary, Hall's second model recognizes that "as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute 'what we really are'." There is not only one experience and one identity. Hall sees this second model in constant

15 See, for example, Mitzel 119 and Hutchinson 6ff.
16 Lawrence Grossberg mostly agrees with Hall, but proposes that the term "difference" should be replaced by "otherness" in order to avoid exclusion and to allow coalitions that are not identity-based. Lawrence Grossberg, "Identity and Cultural Studies: Is 'There All There Is'" *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall.
fluctuation and transformation. This definition comes close to the "instrumentalist" treatment of ethnicity in sociology.\textsuperscript{17} The definition of cultural identities in the second model is as follows:

Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power, far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.

In both models, history plays an important role. In the second model it is, however, not the idea of history as fact, but of history as a narrative that can be changed and interpreted in order to find a place and position for oneself. If the constantly changing parameters of history, culture, and power constitute identity, identity has to be in constant flux, too. Stable notions of identity are replaced by the process of identification.\textsuperscript{18} Identification depends strongly on history: "[Identification] goes on changing and part of what is changing is not the nucleus of the 'real you' inside, it is history that's changing. History changes your conception of yourself." (16) For Hall, history is not only a position from which to speak, but it is "also an absolutely necessary resource in what one has to say." History, however, is not a fixed and given entity, readily available. The parts of the identity that are buried in history have to be actively recovered. This process needs to be learned and discovered by each individual person. Summarizing what he calls the "new ethnicities" and their relation to history, Hall writes:

\begin{flushright}
\textit{The stable notions were disrupted by conceptual and theoretical ideas (Hall names Marx, Freud, Saussure, and the "end of the notion of truth") as well as social and cultural changes in the collectivities of class, race, gender, and nation.}
\end{flushright}


\textsuperscript{17} Hutchinson 8f.

\textsuperscript{18}
So the relationship of the kind of ethnicity I'm talking about to the past is not a simple, essential one – it is a constructed one. It is constructed in history, it is constructed politically in part. It is part of narrative. We tell ourselves the stories of the parts of our roots in order to come into contact, creatively, with it. So this new kind of ethnicity – the emergent ethnicities – has a relationship to the past, but it is a relationship that is partly through memory, partly through narrative, one that has to be recovered. It is an act of cultural recovery. (19)

The "new ethnicities" are positioned but are neither fixed in their positionality nor are they essentialistic. "They are neither locked into the past nor able to forget the past." Opposed to the "new ethnicities" are the "old ethnicities" that cling to the past and "can only be sure that they really exist at all if they consume everyone else." Hall asks for a notion of an identity "that knows were it came from, where home is, but also lives in the symbolic – in the Lacanian sense – knows you can't really go home again. You've got to find out who you are in the flux of the past and the present." (20)

Stephen Cornell, to mention yet another opinion on the subject, chooses a different point of departure. His theories on narratives and identity come not from the field of cultural studies but have their origins in sociology and psychology.19 Yet he draws similar conclusions. In his article "That's the Story of Our Life," he establishes three theses:

The first is that narrative lies at the heart of many ethnic identities. ... The second point is that the narrative form of ethnicity becomes most salient in periods of rupture, when the taken-for-grantedness that characterizes most collective identities is disturbed. The third point is that the narrativization of ethnicity is intimately bound up in power relations, albeit in particular ways. (41/42)

Cornell, too, assumes that narratives and the identities generated by them can change over time. According to him, the process of creating a narrative (narrativization) consists of three parts, all of them liable to change: selection, plotting, interpretation.

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19 Stephen Cornell, "That's the Story of Our Life," We Are a People: Narrative and Multiplicity in Constructing
Important historical or traumatic events, and, to a lesser extent, banalities can be selected to become the object of a narrativization. While the choice of an object is important, plotting and interpretation really define a narrative. Cornell writes that "[n]arrative – the relational ordering and framing of event and experience – is peculiarly suited to … sense-making tasks." (44) Often it is a therapeutic urge to make sense of something that seems senseless or inexplicable, or the need to create a place for oneself in society that initiates the narrative process. Cornell sees, as Hall does, the re-telling of history as one means to start a narrative and thus start the process of identification.

If personal and collective identity can be constructed through narratives, literature and the arts become powerful means for defining the self and the other and in describing belonging and difference. Culture, as Abigail Solomon-Godeau among others points out, can "in both mass and elite forms - be an important site for contestation and intervention."21

The United States, a former colony and colonizer at different times, lives and exists from identity narratives. These arise from an uprooted indigenous population, from African people dislocated and brought to a new world, and, most of all, from immigrants coming from all over the world. *E pluribus unum*: the United States is comprised of these people and their stories. The best-known narrative is the one of the American dream. It was changed, adapted, and told in many different variations by many different voices. It is the story of becoming American, of belonging. While some aspects of these various narratives might be similar, others vary heavily depending on the historical and political situation, and on the ethnicity, class, and gender of the narrator.

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20 Narratives and narrativization are also used as therapy. A good description of narrative therapy can be found in Jill Freedman and Gene Combs, *Narrative Therapy: the Social Construction of Preferred Realities* (New York: Norton, 1996).

Asian Americans have their own identity narratives, their own stories about becoming American. In the course of Asian American identity-building, various identity models can be recognized. Both of Hall's ethnicities, new and old ones, can be found, for example, since articulations of Asian American identity range from nationalism to hybridity. As we will see in Asian American literature, histories as well as collective experiences play important roles in Asian American identity construction.

In the beginning of the debate on Asian American identity and belonging, in the late 1960s, a discussion on stereotyping and misrepresentation took place. In the following I will briefly outline the best-known misrepresentations that Asians and Asian Americans have had to deal with in the past, and still sometimes deal with in the present, so that it becomes clear what triggered the discussion.

B. Mistaken Identities

If culture is the site in which identities are defined, important questions then include, Who is in control of culture? What are their intentions? The manipulation of the image of certain individuals or groups of people becomes blatantly overt in times of crisis. It is then that one's own identity is most directly threatened, that the need to diminish other ways of being arises, and it is then that Hall's "old ethnicities" try to eat up the new ones. War propaganda both on political and cultural level is a well-known example. In order to harm, oppress, or simply run down a certain group of people, this group is often depicted in an extremely negative way. Stereotyping – i.e. the use and dissemination of simplified and often misleading ideas, mostly based on difference – is the easiest way in which to achieve this. While it used to be easy to

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22 Some of the stereotypes that will be discussed in the following seem rather old-fashioned. They are, however, still very much alive as the Abercrombie & Fitch debate that took place in the summer of 2002 shows. The retailer Abercrombie & Fitch brought out a series of T-shirts featuring "typical" caricatures of Asians with buckteeth, straw hats, and idiotic grins that caused a huge uproar within Asian American
recognize stereotypes, in recent years stereotyping has become more subtle, but no less problematic.

Asians became, like many ethnic groups, especially members of so-called visible minorities, stereotyped as soon as they touched American soil. The best-known Asian stereotype in American popular culture may be Charlie Chan. The fat little Chinese detective was "born" in 1925. His character was created by Earl Derr Biggers, who wrote six Charlie Chan novels, all of which appeared serialized in the *Saturday Evening Post* before they were published in book form. From the late 1920s through the 1940s, forty-eight Charlie Chan films were made in four different studios, with six different non-Chinese actors as Charlie Chan. The movies were very popular and have also been shown on television many times. Charlie Chan is known for his dainty walk, for his pidgin English, and for his cryptic and absurd, pseudo-Confucian sayings:

"Observe."
"When weaving nets, all threads counted."
"Woman's intuition like feather on arrow. May help flight to truth."
"Necessity mother of invention, but sometimes stepmother of deception."
"Boy scout knife, like ladies' hairpin. Have many uses."
"Best place for skeleton is in family closet."
"Chinese people interested in all things psychic."
"If strength were all, tiger would not fear scorpion."...

In spite of his clumsy appearance and his bad English, he is able to solve the most complicated murder mysteries, mostly due to his "Oriental" wisdom, patience, and "sixth sense."

On first sight, Charlie Chan seems to be a positive character, friendly, funny,
and successful in his job, and, indeed, the intentions behind the creation of his character were, superficially seen, not racist. Earl Derr Biggers wanted to invent "an amiable Chinese on the side of law and order," since this seemed to him to be a novelty in popular culture. John Stone, the producer of the first Charlie Chan movie, is said to have decided on a character whose image opposed the "unfortunate Fu Manchu characterization of the Chinese," so as to demonstrate that "any minority group could be sympathetically portrayed on the screen with the right story and approach."n26

In spite of all the good intentions behind his creation, his professional success, and his general popularity, the character Charlie Chan is not very popular with many Asian Americans.27 Especially in the late 1960s and the 1970s, when for many Asian Americans an increased awareness of racial and cultural identity was raised by the African American-led civil rights movement and the Vietnam war, his character became heavily criticized as the embodiment of many despicable Asian American stereotypes. Quiet, mysterious, a bad English speaker, inscrutable, never really American, almost feminine in his ways, not handsome, and overweight, he is not exactly the kind of movie hero one would wish for and by whom one would like to be represented by in public. As Filipina American writer Jessica Hagedorn puts it, being "our most famous fake 'Asian' pop icon,"n28 Charlie Chan can be seen in many ways as an example for all the other stereotypes of Asian Americans that exist, and since stereotypes always offer a distorted or even wrong image of reality which might be highly harmful for the persons concerned, it was necessary to remove him along with all the other stereotypes of Asians and Asian Americans:

The slit-eyed, bucktooth Jap thrusting his bayonet, thirsty for blood. ... The childlike, indolent Filipino houseboy. Always giggling. Bowing and scraping. Eager to please, but untrustworthy. The sexless, hairless Asian male. The servile, oversexed Asian female. The

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27 When in the 1980s a new Charlie Chan movie was planned, the idea had to be abandoned due to heavy protests from the Chinese American communities. Kim, *Asian American Literature* 18.
28 Hagedorn xxi.
Geisha. The sultry, sarong-clad, South Seas maiden. The serpentine, cunning Dragon Lady. ... Effeminate. ... Savage. Invisible. Mute. ...

All of them are either dangerous, stupid, evil or completely unthreatening, but never normal human images.

In his book Orientals. Asian Americans in Popular Culture, Robert G. Lee has categorized these stereotypes into six main images: "the pollutant, the coolie, the deviant, the yellow peril, the model minority, and the gook." He points out that each of these images was constructed at a specific historical moment, in a moment of crisis or threat for the "American national family," his term for the American mainstream.

Since these misrepresentations and exclusions mainly take place in the realm of culture, they also have to be challenged in culture. It were in particular Asian American writers who, in the late 1960s, started with the deconstruction of these stereotypes. In this discussion, two anthologies, Aiiieeeee! and The Big Aiiieeee!, played an important role. I will describe these anthologies and the debate surrounding them in the following.

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29 Hagedorn xxii.
31 Of course there have always been legal and political activities, too, but cultural debates are very visible and probably extremely influential in this case.
II. Discourses on Identity in Asian America

A. *Aiiieeeee!

The discussion on what can be called "Asian American," i.e. what Asian America is and who is part of it, started in the late 1960s and early 1970s. One of the first anthologies of Asian American literature, *Aiiieeeee!,* can definitely be seen as a milestone in Asian American literary history. It also marks the beginning of the discussion about Asian American identity.

*Aiiieeeee!* was first published in 1974 and was edited by the writers Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong. They were the first to openly declare war on stereotypes and misrepresentation, since they felt that the very first step towards any discussion about Asian American identity and literature is to prove stereotypes wrong and dispel them for good:

> Before we can talk about our literature, we have to explain our sensibility. Before we can explain our sensibility, we have to outline our histories. Before we can outline our history, we have to dispel the stereotypes, we have to prove the falsity of the stereotypes and the ignorance of easily accessible, once well-known common history - as maddening and pitifully unfulfilling a task as trying to teach forty-year-old illiterates the alphabet and Shakespeare in an hour and a half.\(^\text{32}\)

The stereotype they were most upset about was the image of the emasculated Asian American male:

> The white stereotype of the acceptable and unacceptable Asian is utterly without manhood. 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.\(^\text{33}\)

*Aiiieeeee!* thus has multiple aims: it attempts to devalue and remove stereotypes,


\(^{33}\) Chan et al., introduction, *Aiiieeeee!* 14-15.
explain Asian American history and identity, and discuss Asian American literature. Consequently, *Aiiieeee!* contains not only excerpts of carefully chosen novels, plays and a number of short stories, but also a lot of background information - more than a quarter of the book consists of theoretical writings by Chan and others.

In the preface entitled "Fifty Years of Our Whole Voice," as well as in two introductory essays on Asian American literature (one on Chinese and Japanese American literature, and another on Filipino American literature), the editors clearly state their ideas regarding Asian American identity and literature and give brief outlines of Asian American history and literary history. The literary works included in the anthology are meant as examples and illustrations of the ideas formulated in the theoretical parts. The texts included should give realistic accounts of the Asian American experience, and prove that there is an Asian American culture and literature Asian Americans can relate to and be proud of.

In the preface of *Aiiieeee!,"Asian American" is clearly defined. The notion of Asian Americans represented in the anthology is described as follows:

Our anthology is exclusively Asian American. That means Filipino, Chinese, and Japanese Americans, American born and raised, who got China and Japan from the radio, off the silver screen, from television, out of comic books, from the pushers of white American culture that pictured the yellow man as something that when wounded, sad, or angry, or swearing, or wondering, whined, shouted, or screamed "aiiieeee!" Asian America, so long ignored and forcibly excluded from creative participation in American culture, is wounded, sad, angry, swearing, and wondering, and this is his AIIIEEEE!!! It is more than a whine, shout, or scream. It is fifty years of our whole voice.34

The editors probably limit the definition to Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino Americans because at that point these were the largest Asian American groups and had been living in the United States for the longest time. However, not all writers represented in the anthology were "American born and raised;" some of them had immigrated to the United States when they were children or even adults.

34 Chan et al., preface, *Aiiieeee!* xi-xii.
Consequently, the definition is modified a few moments later: "However, between the writer's actual birth and birth of the [Asian American] sensibility, we have used the birth of the sensibility as the measure of being Asian American." The "sensibility" they have in mind is distinctly not Asian and definitely not white American, but Asian American. By stating this clearly, they are able to resist both the prejudice that Asian Americans are either all Asian or all American, as well as the myth of the "dual personality," i.e. that even seventh-generation Asian Americans, due to living between two cultures, can be divided into two halves, one Asian and one American. "Asian" in "Asian American" is meant as a modification of "American," demonstrating that it is possible to be American and non-white at the same time, and that one can be part of American culture without losing the notion of one's ethnic background, and certainly without becoming schizophrenic.

The culture and even the language arising from the Asian American sensibility Chan and the others refer to are very distinctive. Even though the culture and the language are part of mainstream America, they are, according to the editors, so particular and homogeneously present within the Asian American group that they use their existence as a justification for the racialization of the term "Asian American." Asian Americans, in spite of all their differences, were considered one "race," just as African Americans were understood to constitute a single race.

Chan and the others consider it extremely important that Asian Americans become aware of their culture and sensibilities so that they have something to be proud of. This is considered highly important since Asian Americans seem to have already internalized the prejudices, rejections, and racial stereotypes they encountered in white America and therefore started to believe not only that they have no cultural integrity as Asian Americans, but also that they are inferior to whites.36

35 Chan et al., preface, Aiiieeee xiii.
36 Here Chan et al. are echoing Fanon, of course.
American culture, protecting the sanctity of its whiteness, still patronizes us as foreigners and refuses to recognize Asian American literature as "American" literature. America does not recognize Asian America as a presence, though Asian Americans have been here for seven generations. For seven generations we have been aware of that refusal, and internalized it, with disastrous effects.37

The "disastrous effects" are self-contempt, self-rejection, and the cultural and political silence of Asian Americans, which again perpetuates the "complete psychological and cultural subjugation of the Asian American."38 The editors are convinced that it is time for the silence and self-rejection to end. They take African Americans as a positive example of a minority which has gained a presence in American culture:

   American language, fashions, music, literature, cuisine, graphics, body language, morals, and politics have been strongly influenced by Black culture. They have been cultural achievers, in spite of white supremacist culture, whereas Asian America's reputation is an achievement of that white culture - a work of racist art.39

All in all, Aiiiiiiiiii! was meant to be an inspiration to all Asian Americans to deal with their culture, to be proud of it, and to become more active and speak up for their interests.

In the preface to the 1991 edition of Aiiiiiiiiii!, the ideas of the original edition are continued and updated, but there is also more detail on some topics. It is stated that ever since the first publication of the book, little has changed; Asian Americans are still too passive and have accepted the stereotypes. Through this inaction, they have in effect become the accomplices of racists. The editors trace the origins of stereotypes about Chinese Americans to Christian missionaries who wrote on China and Chinese Americans. These stereotypes were also reinforced through Chinese

37 Chan et al., preface, Aiiiiiiiiii! xiii.
38 Chan et al., introduction, Aiiiiiiiiii! 10.
39 Chan et al., introduction, Aiiiiiiiiii! 8.
American autobiographies, which were then written in the paradigm of those Christian documents, continuing the stereotyping started there. The images of Chinese Americans, which were created through these writings, were then passed on to generations of Chinese Americans who believed them to be real because often they were their only written points of reference. This caused and fueled the already mentioned self-contempt and all its consequences. Asian Americans lost their real history and instead thought in terms of "white" history. The result is a loss of identity, and, since Asian Americans with their distinctive culture and language have been racialized as a group, the process could culminate in their "racial extinction:"

With the loss of identity comes extinction. The loss of Chinese American and Japanese American literary integrity reflects the loss of a sense of yellow historical and cultural integrity. Extinction is all around us....Whites dreamed we would be meek, and we have become the instruments of our own historical and racial extinction.  

The editors claim that the extinction has already started, namely with the high number of Asian American women "marrying out." This fact was already mentioned in the preface to the original edition. It is attributed to the low self-esteem of Asian Americans. The editors see a reflection of it in Asian American literature, because, as is claimed, "yellow men are not sexually attractive to yellow women" in Chinese American and Japanese American writings and consequently there have not been any love stories in the last 150 years of Asian American literature.

One way to regain cultural integrity is supposedly to concentrate more on the "real" Asian American history and literature. In dealing with literature, Asian Americans and most of all Asian American literary critics should take into account the roots of Asian American literature. These roots can be discerned in old Chinese

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40 Chan et al., preface to the Mentor Edition, Aiiieeeee! xl-xl.
41 Chan et al., preface to the Mentor Edition, Aiiieeeee! xl. It is true that love stories are hard to find in Asian America. David Mura is one author who explores the issues of identity, intermarriage, and Asian American (male) sexuality in his books. He has written two memoirs, Turning Japanese: Memoirs of a Sansei (1991) and Where the Body Meets Memory: An Odyssey of Race, Sexuality & Identity (1996), as well as poetry.
tales and their heroic tradition, whose structures still remain in Asian American life and culture. The updated preface of *Aiiieeeee!* of course reflects the ideas behind a second anthology published by the same editors in 1991 – *The Big Aiiieeeee!*

B. *The Big Aiiieeeee!*

As with its predecessor, the theoretical texts of *The Big Aiiieeeee!* precede the literary ones. Additionally, historical and sociological texts have been added. Some of the writers included in *The Big Aiiieeeee!* had also contributed to *Aiiieeeee!* The introduction is similar to the 1991 preface of *Aiiieeeee!* In the successor volume, it is claimed that the relocation of Japanese Americans during World War II had the same effect on the history and culture of Japanese Americans as the Christian writings on Chinese Americans: history, culture and hence identity were destroyed.

New in this anthology is that the editors distinguish between the "real" and the "fake." In fact, this is not completely new, since in *Aiiieeeee!* there was already a distinction made between authors who write about authentic Asian American life and those who write according to stereotypes, but the very strict division into what is to be considered either "good" or "bad" Asian American literature is new. The editors describe their concept as follows:

Here, we offer a literary history of Chinese American and Japanese American writing concerning the real and the fake. We describe the real, from its sources in the Asian fairy tale and the Confucian heroic tradition, to make the work of these Asian American writers understandable in its own terms. We describe the fake - from its sources in Christian dogma and in Western philosophy, history, and literature - to make it clear why the more popularly known writers such as Jade Snow Wong, Maxine Hong Kingston, David Henry Hwang, Amy Tan, and Lin Yutang are not represented here. Their work is not hard to find....

For the soldier [in *Journey to the West*, an old Chinese tale] the essential skill in winning the war to maintain personal integrity is in the telling of the difference

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between the real and the fake. We tell it.\textsuperscript{44} In an essay entitled "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake," one of the editors, writer Frank Chin, goes into more detail about the issues outlined in the introduction.\textsuperscript{45} He explains more explicitly why he considers some writers to be "fake" and others truly Asian American. He supplements his essay with non-fictional texts such as, for example, the bylaws of a Chinatown organization (a "tong"), scripts from interrogations at Japanese relocation camps, and excerpts from FBI files. He retells old Chinese myths and tales the way they have to be retold in his eyes (i.e. not the "fake" way they are told, for example, by Maxine Hong Kingston). The purpose of all this is, again, to straighten out all the misconceptions people may have about Asian American culture and history, and to remind Asian Americans of their culture. I will come back to Chin's essay in the chapter on Maxine Hong Kingston's \textit{The Woman Warrior}.

Since the two \textit{Aiiieeee!} anthologies were so ground-breaking and also so controversial, their ideas on Asian American identity are frequently referred to in later discussions of the concept of Asian American identity.

\section*{C. Other Points of View}

Shirley Geok-lin Lim writes in reference to the 1974 \textit{Aiiieeee!}-anthology that "its editorial arguments are still significant today as they helped form a generation of opinion on Asian American cultural identity."\textsuperscript{46} In the same vein, Jessica Hagedorn states:

The energy and interest sparked by \textit{Aiiieeee!} in the Seventies was essential to

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{44} Chan et al., introduction, \textit{Big Aiiieeee!} xv.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Feminist and Ethnic Literary Theories in Asian American Literature," \textit{Feminist Studies} 19.3 (1993): 575.
\end{itemize}
Asian American writers because it gave us visibility and credibility as creators of our own specific literature. Like other writers of color in America, we were beginning to challenge the long-cherished concepts of a xenophobic literary canon dominated by white heterosexual males.47

Nevertheless, there are many critical opinions on the ideas expressed by Chan and colleagues. A rather muted critique is found, for example, in Stephen Sumida's article "Centers without Margins: Responses to Centrism in Asian American Literature."48 Here Sumida gives a short outline of some of the main ideas represented in Asian American Studies since the late 1960s and of how these ideas moved from the "margins" of the discourse to the "center" and vice versa. He points out that the term "Asian American" itself is perceived by "artists and scholars moving and growing into the field [of Asian American Studies] as totalizing and thus extremely problematic."49 The question of who is to determine what is "Asian American" was raised by some of these new artists and scholars and thus, implicitly, the editors of the two volumes of Aiiiiiiieee!, the "vocal and influential few," were criticized. Sumida continues by stating that many artists nowadays are of the opinion that while one can talk, for example, of Chinese Americans or Filipino Americans, there is no such thing as a conglomerate "Asian American" identity, and he expresses his surprise that it now seems necessary to point this out, since the term "Asian American" originally never implied that there is something like ethnic homogeneity. He attributes the necessity for this reminder to the fact that margins and centers continually shift and that in this case the marginalized term "Asian American" has shifted into a center-position and is therefore associated with new attributes. In order to avoid this and other shifts in focus and to elude the danger of overemphasizing one aspect and marginalizing the other, he proposes seeing Asian American Studies and all its thematic issues, and in general everything connected with it, as "centers without

47 Hagedorn xxvii.
margins." He, in fact, compares this idea with raisin bread (and thus with the Big Bang Theory): no margins (no crust or surface), the whole thing ever-expanding but still energetically contiguous (like raisin bread rising), with all the issues (raisins) connected and interacting. The many centers are thus influencing each other, but there is no domination. Sumida would like to see this theory applied to all areas of Asian American Studies and to the relationship between Asian American Studies and other fields of research.

Garrett Hongo is among the harshest critics of the ideas and ideologies advocated in the two volumes of *Aiiiiiiieee!*. He doubts that it is possible to define a specific Asian American culture in which Asian American artists then have to situate their work. He especially objects to the division of Asian American literature into the two categories, the "real" and the "fake," authentic and inauthentic. He argues that through this separation into authentic and inauthentic, writers are forced into a "kind of political activist model of the Asian American writer." The "ethnic authenticity" of writers is tested, and they have already failed the test if they are successful, i.e. with commercial success or through recognition by any American institution that belongs to the "mainstream." Failing the test then means being "inauthentic" and worth being condemned, as Maxine Hong Kingston is, for example. The worst-case scenario entails being banned from the reading lists of Asian American or Ethnic Studies courses. Hongo calls this "nothing more than fascism, intellectual bigotry, and ethnic fundamentalism of the worst kind." He says that at that moment (i.e. in 1994), Asian American Studies are facing a generational conflict between the "old school" and a new generation:

At this historical moment, the issues surrounding Asian American literature (and perhaps the literary construction of ethnicity in general) could be

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49 Sumida, "Centers" 806.
51 Hongo 4.
52 Hongo 4.
characterized as a generational conflict between those who wish to uphold the notion of a personal subjectivity and poetics within the American experience, minority or mainstream, and those who make their priority the production of a polemicized critique of generalized ideological domination within our culture.\footnote{Hongo 5.}

As feminist, Shirley Geok-lin Lim belongs to the former group Hongo mentions, but she is not as radical in her criticism as he is. She points out the importance of the two volumes of \textit{Aiieee!}, but she criticizes that the editors of \textit{Aiieee!} restricted themselves to criticizing the stereotyping of males and used Ishmael Reed's militant African American ideas as an orientation, unfortunately also adopting "the sexist stance of Reed's position."\footnote{Lim, \textit{Feminist Studies} 574.} This resulted, so Lim, in the stereotyping of Asian American women and in an underrepresentation of women writers in the anthologies, especially of Chinese American women. In each \textit{Aiieee!} there is only one half-Chinese woman writer, namely Diana Chang in the first anthology and Sui Sin Far in the second. This cannot be due to a lack of good female Chinese American writers, since many exist, as other anthologies as well as the success of various novels show. Lim claims that this is because other female Chinese writers did not win the editors' approval since in their opinion they were "fake:" they had commercial success (because they allegedly were using stereotypes and pleased the white audience by doing so) and were thus collaborating with the white supremacists, or they were simply doing injustice to the Asian American male by depicting him in a negative way or even daring to criticize him. According to Frank Chin, there are only a certain number of female writers who include "authentic" Chinese American males in their literature:

Their greatest departure from all the Chinese American autobiographies and autobiographical fictions is in their description of Chinese men. Read them, and this fact jumps out of their books: the only Chinese men who are not emasculated and sexually repellent in Chinese American writing are found in
the books and essays of Sui Sin Far, Diana Chang, and Dr. Han Suyin.  

While these three are mentioned explicitly and their works are included in the two volumes, other writers like Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan, to name but a few, are heavily criticized or simply ignored and banned from the anthologies.

This, of course, bears similarities to resistance that African American women writers encounter. The black feminist Michele Wallace writes, for example, that she first became aware of "the peculiar limitations of the notion that only 'positive images' are appropriate to Afro-American cultural production, particularly cultural production by women" through the discussions in the black community over "negative images" of black men in Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide*. She points out that the writers who are usually blamed for spreading "negative images" are those who would identify their opinions as "feminist" or "womanist," and she asks:

[W]hat makes a critical portrayal of a black person a 'negative image' if films like *Blue Velvet* and *Taxi Driver* don't count as 'negative images' of white men but rather as effective cultural expressions of the reification of desire, or even as compelling critiques of dominant ideologies of family and sexuality?  

Wallace says that in the late 1960s her position in society as a black person had changed, but not her position as a woman, not even as a woman within the black community. Instead of providing unwanted criticism, women should "help the brother get his thing together."

The same was true in Asian America. Frank Chin, for example, called Maxine Hong Kingston "racist" and influenced by the "white, racist mind" for criticizing misogynist aspects of Chinese culture in *The Woman Warrior*, for a "true," "authentic"

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55 Chin 12.
57 Wallace 4.
58 Wallace 22.
Chinese American woman would never have done so.\textsuperscript{59} Also, double standards are applied when it comes to interracial relationships: while in both volumes of *Aiiiieeee!* the high rate of intermarriages by Asian American women is mentioned and criticized because of its contribution to the potential extinction of Asian America, in the theoretical writings nothing is said about Asian American men and white women. However, in Jeffery Paul Chan’s short story "The Chinese in Haifa," one of the short stories included in the first *Aiiiieeee!,* Bill, the Chinese American protagonist, lives divorced from his Chinese American wife and towards the end of the story has a sexual affair with Ethel, the wife of his white, Jewish neighbor.\textsuperscript{60} If a female Asian American writer had written a similar story with an Asian American woman getting a divorce from her Asian American husband and meanwhile having sex with the white neighbor, this writer would definitely have been criticized for depicting Asian American males as unattractive and having Asian American women prefer white men. Because Bill is able to have a relationship with a married white woman, he is seen as a counterpart to the stereotype of the emasculated Asian American male.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim continues her criticism of the *Aiiiieeee!*-anthologies by saying that the editors acted as "culture makers" who defined an Asian American sensibility which was based on male-centered language and culture, and she points out that, in her opinion, ever since the publication of Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* in 1976, Asian American literature has been a site of conflict between women’s ideas of culture on the one hand and the ideas of the "culture makers," the "cultural nationalists" on the other.\textsuperscript{61} She sees the raising of feminist issues and the publication of anthologies with women’s writings as clear signs for the "gender split."\textsuperscript{62} While the works in these anthologies have certain "general themes of

\textsuperscript{59} Chin 26-27.
\textsuperscript{61} Lim, *Feminist Studies* 577.
\textsuperscript{62} Lim is probably referring to *The Forbidden Stitch* (1989), which she co-edited, and *Making Waves* (1989). For an extensive analysis of the influence of these two anthologies on Asian American literature and their role in
immigrant concerns and first-generation conflicts, acknowledgment of cultural sources and roots in Asian societies, and thematics of family bond/conflicts" in common with the works in the *Aiieeee*-anthologies, they differ completely from the latter by being "nonauthoritative, decentered, nondogmatic, unprogrammatic, uncategorizing, inclusive," all in all being full of, so Lim quoting Carol Gilligan, "female" sensibilities. This is, according to Lim, the better approach because it takes into account that any definition of what is Asian American and what is an Asian American sensibility must always be provisional. This is not only because the political and historical situation changes continually, but also because of the nature of Asian American immigration: Asian American immigration has always taken place in waves, from when it began in the early nineteenth century until today. Therefore, there cannot be a fixed definition of Asian American culture, it being impossible to embrace all aspects of the continually changing situation.

Elaine Kim offers a balanced criticism of the *Aiieeee*-anthologies. An early critique can be found in her groundbreaking *Asian American Literature* (1982), the first exhaustive study on Asian American literature. There she criticizes Frank Chin and Jeffery Paul Chan for only delineating some of the factors that have suppressed Chinese American males in their fiction and for not offering a new, positive identity for them. She points out that their male characters are always doomed to failure and therefore do not offer an alternative. In later works, Kim has always stressed the importance of the "cultural nationalists" in helping to avoid Asian Americans becoming "invisible." She states that "insisting on a unitary identity seemed the only effective means of opposing and defending oneself against marginalization" and was therefore crucial. In order to achieve a "unitary identity," such critical differences as gender, nationality, and class had to be leveled. Kim writes that the "congealed Asian

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63 Lim, *Feminist Studies* 579.

64 Kim, *Asian American Literature* 189-94.
American identity that emerged, though limited because it itself was a product of hegemony, has been a critically important weapon" and is still used as "mantle and armor" whenever needed. At the same time, Kim points out that since the world has changed politically, economically, technically ever since the 1960s and 1970s, the conceptions of an Asian American identity must have changed as well.\textsuperscript{65} Because, according to the \textit{Aiiiiiiieee!}-definition of "Asian American," "there were not many ways of being Asian American" and the "ideal was male, heterosexual, Chinese or Japanese American, and English-speaking," conflicts were foreseeable. That which was once excluded soon started to clamor for acceptance.

Nowadays, using Asian American identity as "mantle and armor" (Elaine Kim) or as an "organizing tool" to achieve political strength (Lisa Lowe) is still believed to be effective.\textsuperscript{66} It is, however, also important to acknowledge issues such as class, gender, and sexuality because otherwise domination and marginalization continue within the group and some Asian Americans might end up dominating other Asian Americans. Instead, a more universal perspective of identity and coalition-building is focused on. Lisa Lowe writes:

\begin{quote}
In the 1990s, we can afford to rethink the notion of racialized ethnic identity in terms of differences of national origin, class, gender, and sexuality rather than presuming similarities and making the erasure of particularity the basis of unity. In the 1990s, we can diversify our practices to include a more heterogeneous group and to enable crucial alliances - with other groups of color, class-based struggles, feminist coalitions, and sexuality-based efforts - in the ongoing work of transforming hegemony.\textsuperscript{67}
\end{quote}

Lowe is of the opinion that the terms heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity offer concepts that help to understand the conditions of Asians in the United States and are appropriate to describe a better idea of their "identities." Of the three terms, probably only the one of "hybridity" needs some explanation: Lowe points out that


for her hybridization "is not the 'free' oscillation between or among chosen identities," but rather a process through which immigrants try to protect themselves against the economical, political, social, cultural, and racial violence of the society they live in.\textsuperscript{68} This of course corresponds with the idea of a unified Asian American identity as "armor and mantle" with many heterogeneous identities underneath.

I do believe that the newer ideas summarized in the last part of this chapter are considerably more appropriate for our time than the oppressive views expressed in the \textit{Aiiieeeee!}-anthologies. It is, however, also true that \textit{Aiiieeeee!} did important work and that for its time its tone was suitable. \textit{The Big Aiiieeeee!} is a different case, though: it seems as if Chan and the other editors have let almost two decades pass without taking into consideration new trends in politics, literature, or culture. In the beginning of the 1990s, they still advocate the same ideas as in the early 1970s, and with their almost fanatic division between the "real" and the "fake" they have become even more radical than they had been previously. Moreover, with the exception of David Wong Louie, no recent, young Asian American writers were included in \textit{The Big Aiiieeeee!}

Worth criticizing is also the extreme emphasis on the concept of "manhood" in Asian American literature and in stereotypes. This implies, as Shirley Lim has pointed out, that only the male perspective is dealt with and that the female is rendered invisible. It also implies a very rigid concept of masculinity that will not leave any room for difference. The Asian American man, according to Chan and the other editors can only be heterosexual, since anything else would not be "male" enough and would thus support the cliché of the effeminate Asian American. It is certainly important to point out that heroic and "cool" male characters were rare in early Asian American literature and non-existent in white literature. It therefore

\textsuperscript{67} Lowe 83.

\textsuperscript{68} Lowe 67 and 82.
seems natural to insist on the creation of some Asian American heroes of the classical type to make up for this lack. To draw the conclusion that gay Asian American characters, since they frequently appear in contemporary Asian American literature, are just another variation of the male Asian American stereotype is ignorant and denies the existence of homosexual Asian Americans in literature and real life. In the introduction to *The Big Aiieeeee!* the editors claim:

> It is an article of white liberal American faith today that Chinese men, at their best, are effeminate closet queens like Charlie Chan and, at their worst, are homosexual menaces like Fu Manchu. No wonder David Henry Hwang's derivative *M. Butterfly* won the Tony for best new play of 1988.\(^6^9\) The good Chinese man, at his best, is the fulfillment of white male homosexual fantasy, literally kissing white ass. Now Hwang and the stereotype are inextricably one.\(^7^0\)

The *Aiieeeee!*-editors thus do not only exclude feminist issues and Asian Americans who are of neither Chinese, Japanese, nor Filipino descent from their definitions of Asian American identity and literature, but they ban anybody who cannot measure up to their ideals, anybody who is different. Thus, quite a large spectrum of people does not fit into their definition. It is no wonder that the definition has become too narrow and needed to be revised and replaced by ideas more flexible. Here, Stuart Hall can once again be brought in. He writes about the identity politics of the late 1960s: "[W]e maintained the notion, the myth, the narrative that we were really all the same. That notion of essential forms of identity is no longer tenable."\(^7^1\)

Times have definitely changed since the 1960s in a multitude of ways. The next subchapter will outline the change in attitude in Asian American Studies, a field that came into being thanks to people like the *Aiieeeee!*-editors. It is a discipline that is

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\(^{69}\) *M. Butterfly* is about the homosexual relationship between the French diplomat Gallimard and a Chinese opera singer, Song. For a detailed discussion of the problematic of the play see, for example, David L. Eng's article "In the Shadows of a Diva: Committing Homosexuality in David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*," *Amerasia Journal* 20.1 (1994): 93-116.

\(^{70}\) Chan et al., introduction, *Big Aiieeeee!* xiii.
becoming more and more popular. Questions that will be dealt with are, among others: Which of the original ideas and ideals of Asian American Studies survived the many changes the field underwent ever since it came into existence in the late 1960s? What are the most crucial changes?

D. 'Got Rice?' – Asian American Studies Then and Now

Of course, Asian American Studies have changed considerably (regarding topics, theories, politics, and demographics) since the late 1960s, but the legacy of the 1960s is much greater than often assumed.

The grammatically incorrect, hyphenless spelling of the adjective "Asian American" is only one small example for this. The term "Asian American" came into being in the 1960s, and very soon thereafter, the hyphen was voted out. Sau-ling Wong writes: "[T]he dropping of the hyphen from Asian-American ... was meant to affirm the indivisible integrity of the Asian American experience, that is, to minimize any negative connotation associated with bilaterality." The hyphen separates "Asian" from "American," and this represents for many Asian Americans a persistent discourse that suggests that Asians will never be fully accepted as Americans, and that they would rather be seen as hybrid Americans, pulled between East and West. It is therefore important to many Asian Americans to assert that they are "real" Americans with an Asian heritage by keeping "Asian" an adjective, modifying "American." The hyphen remains omitted in most of today's writing on Asian America as well, and leaving it away is, at least in scholarly work, always a conscious act. It can be read either as a statement that today the "politics of the hyphen," to borrow Peter Feng's term, is still of importance because the status of Asian Americans as "Americans" within the United States is still disputed, or as a tribute to the achievements and struggles of the 1960s.

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71 Hall, "Ethnicity" 17
72 Sau-ling C. Wong, "Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical
Asian American Studies – Where Did They Come From And Where Are They Heading?

In the late 1960s, influenced by the African American-led civil rights movement and the discussions about the war in Vietnam, many students of color felt that their histories and literatures ought to be represented in U.S.-American curricula and went on strike for their interests. In 1968/69 African American, Asian American, Chicano and Native American students at San Francisco State University and the University of California, Berkeley, formed campus coalitions known as the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF). They demanded the establishment of Third World Colleges (what was later called Ethnic Studies programs), which were to be comprised of departments involved in the teaching of Asian American, African American, Chicano and Native American Studies. The strikes were lengthy, difficult, and sometimes even violent, but they indeed resulted in the establishment of Ethnic Studies programs at SF State and UC Berkeley in 1969 and later at other universities throughout the country. One very important element of Ethnic Studies and thus also of Asian American Studies as a part of it was the establishment of a close working relationship between students and faculty and the ethnic communities. Other important goals of Asian Americans Studies in the 1960/70s were the democratization of the university and, most importantly, the creation of an Asian American (cultural) nation. In the following, I will briefly touch upon these issues, i.e. academia's link to community and the democratization of the university, and then talk more extensively about the idea of an Asian American nation since this is where most of the theoretical changes happened in the last 30 years.

Many people argue that in the past a rupture between theory and practice and a transformation from egalitarian to elitist took place in Asian American Studies. It seems to many that teaching and academic discussions have lost touch with the Asian American communities and hence abandoned one of their main tasks: to serve the

people. According to Russel Leong, editor of *Amerasia Journal*, in Asian American Studies in the 1990s there were those who linked formal knowledge and history with community and political engagement and those who were solely interested in their careers - "concerned with articulating and redefining terms, with knowledge, power, and positioning within academia, and with the incestuous workings of intellectual power and production." The latter group, it is feared, would predominate, with many of the older generation of professors retiring, who experienced and shaped the activist years of the 1960s.

While nowadays there indeed might be less interest in community transformation among academics, this does not hold true in general. There are momentarily no community projects integrated in classes at UC Berkeley; SF State, however, has managed to keep the tradition of linking the classroom to community work. Activities of professors at both universities prove that active participation in public life can be very valuable for communities and might contribute to the reconstruction of society and the making of one's own history. The excellent academic and non-academic work that Elaine Kim, professor of Asian American Studies at UC Berkeley, did during and after *sa-i-gu*, the Los Angeles riots of 1992, may be only one very striking example for this. Elaine Kim did not only write various academic and non-academic articles, she also co-produced a documentary on the riots (*Sa-I-Gu: A Korean Women's Perspective*) and co-edited a book, *East To America*, in which different Korean American life stories were portrayed. In doing this, she tried to explain the reasons underlying *sa-i-gu* and to raise interest and understanding for and between the different ethnic groups involved. She did what Russel Leong asks scholars involved in Asian Americans Studies to do: translating academic work into the vernacular and thus writing for both academic and non-academic readers,

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and working closely with members from the community. In my opinion, professors like Elaine Kim are an inspiration to younger Asian Americanists, in their theoretical as well as in their practical work and that thus the link between academia and the communities will never be cut off.

Regarding the effort to democratize the university, i.e. to make university education accessible to everyone interested – this effort definitely seems to have failed due to the very competitive American university system that is elitist and hierarchical in its very nature. A compensation for this could be, for example, that research results be made available to a broader audience for example through the teaching of community classes (i.e. outside university), and publishing in non-academic newspapers and magazines.

The Asian America Nation
"Asian America" is a quasi-geographical term that became popular in the 1970s. Sau-ling Wong argues that it reflects the yearning for a contained site at the time. Theories then were nationalist – cultural nationalist – and radical, as can be seen in the examples of the above-mentioned two Aiiiiieee-et-anthologies. They had very American-centered, domestic emphases: authors were mostly American-born and -raised and hence anglophone, mostly even monolingual. It was very important to "claim America" for Asian Americans and to be American, and as a result, everything Asian was handled with extreme care. For early Asian Americanists it was important that a distinction between Asians and Asian Americans was made; the U.S. borders were thus highly relevant in order to define Asian American identity. The t-shirts now sold by an Asian American magazine sporting the slogan "Got rice?" would not have sold well then. This t-shirt slogan is an allusion to the "Got Milk" ad campaign in which famous people tell you why you should drink milk, but in which items that

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75 Kim cooperated in both her projects on sa-i-ge  with members from Koreatown, Los Angeles.
76 Wong 4.
are more or less inseparable from milk, such as a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich or a chocolate-chip cookie are also included. People would have tried to avoid fulfilling stereotypes at all costs, even in jokes. Nowadays there are multiple ways to read and deal with stereotyping and even to play with it.

The 2000s are not about building an Asian American nation state anymore but rather about denationalizing it. Denationalization was triggered by a couple of serious changes in the demographics, economics, and politics of Asian America that have happened in the last 30 or 40 years:

First of all, the Immigration Act of 1965 caused an increase and diversification especially of the newer Asian American groups in the United States (Filipino, Korean, Southeast Asian, and South Asian communities). An enormous growth of these communities happened especially in the 1980s. Most Asian Americans today are foreign-born.

Due to the relatively recent economic and political importance of many Asian countries and the end of the cold war, the West has become more interested in cooperation. It could even be said that East and West have moved closer together.

Finally, modern technology makes it easier to keep in touch with one's country of origin. One can easily keep in contact with friends and family by telephone, e-mail, or even travel to see them (if it can be afforded). Asian movies, music, and other commodities are readily available. Immigration today does not mean that links to the country of origin are cut off nor that one actually will stay in that new country forever (many Asian Americans in science and technology are relocating to Asia, for example).  

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77 A more detailed account of all the changes that have been taking place in the demographics, economics, and politics of Asian America can be read in Sau-ling Wong's article.
Consequently, Asian America today is much more Asia-oriented than it was in the 1960s. Elaine Kim writes: "The lines between Asian and Asian American, so important to identity formation in earlier times, are increasingly being blurred."\textsuperscript{78} Sau-ling Wong observes that segments of the Asian professional class have developed its own pattern of cross-Pacific commuting, and that there are more and more "parachute kids." She explains "parachute kids" as follows: "In view of Asia's vastly superior economic prospects but continued political uncertainty, many middle-class Asian families are splitting their members, sending the children ... to study in US schools and/or gain permanent residency while the breadwinner stays in Asia. Family ties are maintained by frequent visits in either direction."\textsuperscript{79} But even those Asians/Asian Americans who would not be able to afford a mobility like this can keep in touch with Asia more easily when modern technology can bring Asia to the living room.

Thus, the meaning of "Asian American" needs to be reexamined: it can no longer be taken for granted that Asians immigrating to the United States eventually turn into Asian Americans for good. Parachute kids, Sau-ling Wong points out, experience the United States neither as immigrants nor as foreign students, but a share in both situations. Immigrants who were forced to leave their countries for political reasons might forever think of the country they had to leave behind as their home and never even attempt to become "American," "claim America," or root there. "Their situation is particularly vexed when displacement is a direct consequence of U.S. imperialism ... In such cases, only a diasporic perspective can provide the conceptual room needed to accommodate non-conforming cultural orientations, as well as expose the role of American foreign policy in shaping global patterns of population movements."\textsuperscript{80} Wong states that of course such a change in perspectives opens up a wider range of identities to choose from, enables "fluid subjectivities" and

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{78} Quoted in Wong 5.
\textsuperscript{79} Wong 7.
\textsuperscript{80} Wong 10.
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places them in a more global context. She, however, also warns that the term "diaspora" is often misused and wrongly applied and that a fluid subjectivity in practice is often more a result of privilege and class. How unlimited can one move and shift in a world of passports, visa restrictions, and immigration quotas? Hence, while the body often cannot choose its actual home, the mind can, and this is the crucial fact that should be considered when discussing theories. I would argue, though, that it has always been like that, and that it has only become much easier and obvious in recent years.

Now that the distance between Asia and America is easier to bridge, both physically and mentally, Asian Americanists have started to think more globally. At the 1999 annual conference of the Association for Asian American Studies in Philadelphia, Gayatri Spivak asked that Asian Americanists should study Asian languages – not in search for one's roots (if one has an Asian background) or to be able to do historical work, read sources etc., but in order to be able to deal with the close connection and interaction going on between the continents.\textsuperscript{81} There is now a need for a transnational analysis of political, economic, and cultural relationships. Analyses should be cross-national and cross-cultural because of the influence of globalization on the various areas of our lives. An example of this is Lisa Lowe's work on Asian immigrant women garment workers in the United States. According to her, "understanding them in more than a domestic context, linking them to other women of color in the US as well as to transnational capitalism and labor politics worldwide" are crucial issues.\textsuperscript{82}

One has to mention at this point that Asian America has never been isolated from influences from the outside. Inspirations came, as already mentioned, from the civil rights and the black power movements and the anti-Vietnam War movement, as well as the cultural revolution in China or Marxist theories. While the national

\textsuperscript{81} Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Home and the World," Origins and Crossings, Sixteenth National Conference of the Association for Asian American Studies, Marriott Hotel, Philadelphia, 1 April 1999.

\textsuperscript{82} Wong 9. For a more detailed discussion of the topic see Lowe 154-173.
boundaries of the United States were important for the cultural nationalists, they have never been a serious issue for Asian American historians and social scientists concerned with immigration or border-crossing. Additionally, the internal colonialism model that was popular especially in the earlier days of Asian American Studies, allowed analogies to be drawn between the exploitation in the United States (in the "Third World within") and in the international Third World.

So while many positive aspects in Asian American Studies have remained, even though they were thought to have been lost in the course of time (such as the activism of staff and students), many new impulses and objects of study have arisen due to the continuous changes in our world. Naturally, the concepts of identity and belonging, which are closely intertwined with the changes described above, have themselves been constantly changing, too. The following chapter will illustrate how this is reflected in literature.
III. Identity and Belonging in Asian American Classics

A. "Asian American Classics"

This chapter will read and interpret "the sacred Asian American texts," texts that were used in Asian American Studies to offer an alternative canon at a time when canonization as such was not yet being criticized. They were written - as Elaine Kim sarcastically puts it - by "dead yellow men' instead of 'dead white men'" and are now considered Asian American classics. John Okada's No-No Boy (1957) and Louis Chu's novel Eat a Bowl of Tea (1961) will be used as examples for these kind of works.

The two novels differ greatly from each other in subject and style. One is Japanese American and the other Chinese American, and they deal explicitly with their respective cultural experiences. They nevertheless have many things in common, such as the dealing with the generational conflict between immigrants and their children and the emergence of a new concept of identity from this conflict. They are based on actual historical situations and events, giving accurate images of the time and communities they take place in.

It is exactly because of this high degree of realism that the books are now among the Asian American classics. They were made into classics, along with Carlos Bulosan's America Is In the Heart (1946) and Toshio Mori's Yokohama, California (1949) by the Aiiiiieeeel!-editors who appreciated the books because of their realistic approach. Their works show Asian American communities as they really were, from a Chinese, Japanese, or Filipino American point of view and not from a Chinese or Chinese-according-to-white perspective. The Aiiiiieeeel!-editors see their ideas of Asian American identity and literature reflected in these works.

No-No Boy was, in a literal sense, rediscovered by the Aiiiiieeeel!-editors (Jeffery Chan found it in a San Francisco bookstore in 1970) and then made available for a

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83 Elaine H. Kim, preface, Charlie Chan is Dead: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction, ed. Jessica
broader audience again. Excerpts from both No-No Boy and Eat a Bowl of Tea can be found in Aiiiiiiiiii! as well as in The Big Aiiiiiiiiii!. Additionally, Aiiiiiiiiii! was dedicated to the memory of John Okada and Louis Chu. The Aiiiiiiiiii!-editors wrote introductions and afterwords for the University of Washington editions of the two novels. In addition to their overt enthusiasm for the novels and the wish to make them accessible to a broader audience, the Aiiiiiiiiii!-editors were interested in these novels in order to "restore the historical foundations of Asian American culture."

In the following subchapters, I will give short analyses of the books, focusing on their ideas of Asian American identity and belonging.

1. John Okada: No-No Boy

No-No Boy is the only published novel written by John Okada. Okada was born in Seattle, Washington in 1923 and died in 1971. Having graduated from the University of Washington and Columbia University, he worked as a librarian and wrote technical brochures. During World War II, he served as sergeant in the U.S. Air Force. Upon its first publication, No-No Boy was not a success at all. It was even rejected by the Japanese American communities. Okada died in obscurity, and his wife burned another novel he had written along with all his manuscripts and letters after she had unsuccessfully offered to give them to the Japanese American Research Project of UCLA.

a) Historical Background

Japanese migration to the mainland of the United States started around the 1890s.

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85 Kim, Asian American Literature 258.
87 The history of Japanese immigration to Hawaii is different from the one to the mainland. For more information on this, see Ronald Takaki, Strangers from a Different Shore (Boston: Little, 1989) 132-76. Another excellent book on Asian American history is Sucheng Chan, Asian Americans. An Interpretive History
Most of the Japanese considered themselves "dekasegini," sojourners who were working temporarily in a foreign country and who intended to go back to Japan after a couple of years. They were doing mostly migratory work in agriculture, railroad construction, and canneries. Most of the Japanese at that time were men who had left their families behind in Japan because they intended to return there anyway and, most of all, because the living and working conditions and the immigration laws in the United States were not favorable for families.

This changed after 1900 when more workers were needed in the service sector, and thus began the formation of a Japanese urban economy with its boarding houses, restaurants, barbershops, poolrooms, tailor and dye shops, laundries, shoe shops, grocery stores and so forth. In rural areas, more and more Japanese started to become farmers. The living and working conditions thus slowly became better for families. Additionally, in 1908 the Gentlemen's Agreement between the United States and Japan was concluded. It restricted the emigration of "laborers" from Japan, but allowed the wives, parents, and children of workers who were already living in the United States to leave the country. From then on, Japanese life in the United States became more normal. Due to discrimination and language barriers, however, most Japanese tended to stay within their communities; Japan Towns came into being at different places along the West Coast.\(^8\)

Since the immigrants were excluded from American citizenship by the Naturalization Law, which reserved naturalized citizenship for "whites,"\(^9\) and due to other kinds of discrimination, many first-generation Japanese Americans (Issei) still felt themselves to be sojourners and oftentimes intended to save up money and then return to Japan. This was often difficult, since most of the time they did not earn the amount of money necessary to return to Japan and to then continue to live there, and,

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\(^8\) Takaki 180-97.

\(^9\) The Naturalization Law was enacted in 1790 and was only abolished in 1952. In 1922, the Ozawa-case made clear that there was no way that exceptions were made and that Japanese and other people of color were not eligible for naturalized citizenship because they were not Caucasian. Takaki 208-09.
particularly, since they had children who were born and raised in the United States and who frequently did not have the same feelings about Japan as their parents.

*No-No Boy* is about some of the consequences after what is likely the most significant event in Japanese American history. After the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, and the subsequent anti-Japanese hysteria in the United States, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942. The Order directed the Secretary of War to prescribe military areas "with respect to which, the right of any person to enter, remain in, or leave shall be subject to whatever restrictions the Secretary of War of the appropriate Military Commander may impose in his direction." As a consequence of the Order, almost 120,000 Japanese Americans living in the states of California, Washington, and Oregon and a smaller number of Japanese Americans from the Hawaiian Islands were forced to leave their homes and were placed first in assembly centers and then in internment camps which were mostly located in desolate desert areas. Even though there were official reports stating that Japanese Americans did not pose any military threat, they were considered an internal threat to national security as possible spies and saboteurs. This included not only the Issei, the first-generation Japanese Americans, but also Niseis and Sanseis (second- and third-generation Japanese Americans) who were American citizens by birth and whose Constitutional rights were hence violated by the Order. The Order not only violated the Constitution, but it was also xenophobic, since it seemed to have targeted only Japanese Americans. The government was reasonable enough to leave most Americans of German or Italian descent in peace, even though the United States was at war with their countries of origin as well.

The internment had material consequences for most Japanese Americans because most of them lost their businesses and jobs as a result of it and were not able to regain the same positions after the end of WWII. The emotional and

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90 Quoted in Takaki 391.
psychological damage done by the mass internment of the Japanese Americans was by all accounts much higher. Not only was life in the camps difficult to endure for many internees, but another important aspect was that the Japanese American community was split into what appeared to be two groups: those who were, from an American point of view, "loyal" and "American" and those who were "disloyal" and "Japanese." The subject drove families and friends apart, and had an especially hard impact on the relationship between many immigrant parents, who were still technically and emotionally Japanese in many cases, and their American-born and –raised children.

The loyalty question was at first discussed only within the community, but it soon became an official topic: In February 1943, all internees were required to answer loyalty questionnaires. The idea behind the questionnaires was to find out who was potentially "dangerous" and who was probably not and would therefore be eligible for certain jobs, earlier resettlement outside the camps, and for the draft. Of most importance were Questions 27 and 28 of the questionnaire. Question 27 was directed at draft-age males and Question 28 at all internees:

Question 27: Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty, wherever ordered?
Question 28: Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, or any other foreign government, power, or organization?91

The only answers possible were "yes" and "no," no qualified statement was accepted.

For many Japanese Americans, the questions were not hard to answer. Some, however, found the questions difficult. They would – under normal circumstances – probably have answered affirmatively, but given their present situation they wanted to protest against the internment and the fact that they were asked to fulfill the duties

91 Quoted in Takaki 397.
of a citizen of the United States while being denied the rights. Their twofold "no" was a sign of protest rather than of disloyalty. Those who answered these two questions with a "no" were the so-called "no-no boys." Most of them had to go to prison for resisting the draft and encountered many difficulties inside and outside of the Japanese American communities. As Stan Yogi puts it, the whole situation meant that you had to be "the one or the other," either all Japanese or all American. 92 There was no space in between and no room for explanations.

While a lot of Japanese American literature deals with the traumatizing effect of the internment experience, probably no work deals as intensely with its consequences for the concept of Japanese American identity and the question of belonging as does No-No Boy.

b) Short Summary

No-No Boy begins after the war with the return of Ichiro Yamada, a 25-year-old no-no boy, to his hometown Seattle after two years in camp and two years in prison for resisting the draft. The people he meets in Seattle, his family, friends, and the entire rest of the Japanese community, seem only to want to distinguish between the loyal and the disloyal, those who are American and those who are Japanese at heart, those who belong to the United States and those who belong to Japan. Ichiro feels deeply lost and disoriented. He is not convinced anymore that answering "no" and consequently going to prison was the right thing to do. It has made him feel "like an intruder in a world to which he had no claim," 93 because he has realized that he loves America and being part of it but somehow does not see how he will ever belong there again. During the first couple of days, he restlessly moves from place to place, encountering many people. Some of them do not understand him, and either spit on him for being "disloyal" or are proud of him for being "Japanese." Others are more

93 Okada 1.
understanding. In any case, encounters with both sympathetic and non-sympathetic people help Ichiro discover what to think of himself and his situation, and eventually lead to a viable solution for himself to regain an identity which is neither all-American nor all-Japanese and a feeling of belonging, if not of home.

c) Identity Conflict
Ichiro's identity conflict is typical for many Asian Americans: he feels American, but he cannot and most of the time also does not want to deny his Asian heritage. In his case, the conflict is intensified due to the political situation at hand. His agony is displayed in the following monologue (probably the most quoted monologue in Japanese American literature). I will quote it in full length because it clearly shows Ichiro's identity conflict and how it came into being. The monologue takes place near the beginning of the novel, shortly after Ichiro meets his mother again. She is a fanatically patriotic Japanese woman who refuses to believe that Japan has lost the war. She thinks that these are rumors and that soon Japanese ships will come and bring the loyal Japanese back to Japan. She also considers the letters written by her Japanese relatives asking for food and some money to be U.S. propaganda and is utterly proud of her "Japanese" son who has refused to fight for the American army. She tells Ichiro "You are my son," but Ichiro has different feelings:

No, he said to himself as he watched her part the curtains and start into the store. There was a time when I was your son. There was a time that I no longer remember when you used to smile a mother’s smile and tell me stories about gallant and fierce warriors who protected their lords with blades of shining steel and about the old woman who found a peach in the stream and took it home and, when her husband split it in half, a husky little boy tumbled out to fill their hearts with boundless joy.94 I was that boy in the peach and you were the old woman and we were Japanese with Japanese feelings and Japanese pride and Japanese thoughts because it was all right then to be Japanese and feel and think all the things that Japanese do even if we lived in America. Then there came a time when I was only half Japanese because one is not born in America and taught in America and one does not speak and swear and drink and smoke and play and fight and see and hear in America.

94 This is a simplified version of the story of Momotaro, the Peach Boy, a Japanese folk tale for children.
among Americans in American streets and houses without becoming American and loving it. But I did not love enough, for you were still half my mother and I was thereby still half Japanese and when the war came and they told me to fight for America, I was not strong enough to fight you and I was not strong enough to fight the bitterness which made the half of me which was you bigger than the half of me which was America and really the whole of me that I could not see or feel. Now that I know the truth when it is too late and the half of me which was you is no longer there, I am only half of me and the half that remains is American by law because the government was wise and strong enough to know why it was that I could not fight for America and did not strip me of my birthright. But it is not enough to be American only in the eyes of the law and it is not enough to be only half an American and know that it is an empty half. I am not your son and I am not Japanese and I am not American. ... I wish with all my heart that I were Japanese or that I were American. I am neither and I blame you and I blame myself and I blame the world which is made up of many countries which fight with each other and kill and hate and destroy again and again and again. (16-17)

The monologue reflects Ichiro's perception of his identity up to then. As a child, he had no doubts about being Japanese, which changed into feeling half Japanese and half American while growing up. The internment experience and the loyalty question destroy this balance and leave Ichiro feeling empty and not knowing what he is, Japanese or American. His twofold "no" also represents a "no" to being Japanese and a "no" to being American. He cannot be the former since this would mean denying his coming of age in the United States and many of the things he loves about the country of which he is citizen and where he was at home before the internment, hence he does not really feel Japanese. He cannot identify with being American, either, since at that time the definition of being "American" excluded the slightest feelings of being Japanese or having a Japanese background, as the failure of distinguishing between "Japanese" and "Japanese American" and the subsequent internment of Japanese Americans showed. For Ichiro, being American thus equaled being white, or at least trying very hard to seem white, and since Ichiro simply is not white and is aware that he will not be able to disregard his Japanese background, he cannot feel American. Additionally, he resisted the draft and therefore did not prove
to be a "good" American. The novel is thus not only about being "Japanese" or being "American" but also about the tensions between assimilation, acculturation, and cultural maintenance.

At the time of the monologue, Ichiro feels neither Japanese nor American, and he lacks an alternate identity to replace the gap he feels. The encounters with the different people he meets in his first couple of days back home in Seattle help him to reestablish his lost identity and a vague feeling of belonging.

d) Finding an Identity

No-No Boy has been called a *Bildungsroman*, and considering the influence his encounters with different people on his restless journey around Seattle and Portland have on Ichiro’s development, this label is certainly acceptable. The people Ichiro meets can be divided into three groups.

1. The "Japanese"

Among the "Japanese" in the novel are, first of all, Ichiro’s parents. Since Mrs. Yamada, Ichiro’s mother, is ready to go back to Japan at any moment, the parents do not spend much money on an apartment. They live, together with Taro, their younger son, in a small room behind their grocery store, which is a "hole in the wall" and spend hardly any money. The mother is, as already mentioned, fanatic in her belief in Japanese victory and superiority. She is described as a hard and loveless person, having denied her son even such simple pleasures as comic books or listening to music when he was younger. As Gayle K. Fujita Sato points out, she does not have any traits one would expect of a mother, neither in her behavior nor in her outer appearance. She is described as a "small, flat-chested, shapeless woman who wore her hair pulled back into a tight bun. Hers was the awkward, skinny body of a thirteen-year-old which had dried and toughened through the many years following

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95 Yogi 63.
96 Gayle K. Fujita Sato, "Momotaro’s Exile: John Okada’s No-No Boy," *Reading the Literatures of Asian America,*
but which had developed no further." (10-11) When her husband tells her that Ichiro is back from prison, she is in no hurry to see him but first finishes her work in the small store she runs with her husband. After having finished, the first thing she tells him upon seeing him is: "I am proud that you are back ... I am proud to call you my son." (11) Ichiro does not love her as a mother, and he also does not like her as a person since he sees in her the embodiment of all things Japanese; he considers her mean and crazy and a "[g]oddamned Jap." (30) He blames her fierce nationalism for his answering "no" to the loyalty questions and for his identity conflict.

Ichiro's father is an amiable but very weak person. He is an alcoholic and stands completely in the mother's shadow. He does everything she wants, even if he disagrees. Mr. Yamada is described like a cliché-housewife, walking around in an apron and slippers, fixing meals, effeminate, small, and overweight. Being almost completely passive, he can be considered apolitical. I nevertheless put him in the category "Japanese," because through his passivity he by default supports his wife and thus also represents Japan for Ichiro.

The only other "Japanese" in the book are the Ashidas, a family with which the mother is friends. Ichiro has to go and visit them with his mother on his first evening home. Mrs. Ashida shares Mrs. Yamada's belief in a Japanese victory and is also waiting for the boats which will come and take them to Japan. Ichiro gets upset, for he sees that the madness of his mother was in mutual company and he felt nothing but loathing for the gentle, kindly-looking Mrs. Ashida, who sat on a fifty-cent chair from Goodwill Industries while her husband worked the night shift at a hotel, grinning and bowing for dimes and quarters from rich Americans whom he detested, and couldn't afford to take his family on a bus ride to Tacoma but was waiting and praying and hoping for the ships from Japan. (23)

It is important to note that Ichiro no longer has a family or a proper home. While he felt love for his mother during childhood and adolescence, this feeling has turned
into the opposite. It therefore seems impossible for him to be with his parents in their tiny place. Ichiro's restless moving from place to place is not only caused by his searching for some truth and a viable identity but also by his literal homelessness. Ichiro thus belongs nowhere, in the emotional as well as in the physical sense.

2. The "Americans"

While the "Japanese" characters all seem to be more or less negative, the "Americans" can be subdivided into negative and positive. The positive characters are in direct opposition to the negative "Japanese." After their visit at the Ashidas', Ichiro and his mother go to see other acquaintances of theirs, the Kumasakas. Before the war, the Kumasakas had a dry-cleaning business and were also saving up their money to eventually return to Japan. Now, however, they have bought a house and nice furniture and seemed to have settled down to live in the United States. Soon Ichiro realizes that his mother has taken him to their house out of malice, not in order to make a friendly visit. Bobbie Kumasaka, the son, had died as an American soldier, and Mrs. Yamada had taken Ichiro to their house to show off her living, "Japanese" son and thereby to prove that if the Kumasakas had not failed in their son's education, in educating him the "Japanese" way, he, as well, would still be alive. Ichiro is disgusted when he realizes his mother's intention. He feels more sympathy for the Kumasakas than for the "Japanese" he knows; he likes the house which "was like millions of other homes in America and could never be his own" (26) and which definitely "was part of America" (30) and so different from his parents' and the Ashidas'. He also likes the friendly Mrs. and Mr. Kumasaka, with whom he is able to have conversations he would never have with his own father, which makes him wish "that his father was like this man who made him want to pour out the turbulence in his soul." (27)

A family similar to the Kumasakas is the family of Kenji Kanno. Kenji has lost a leg in combat, fighting for the U.S. Army, and is slowly dying of the wound, which refuses to heal completely. Even though he has been an American soldier, he
becomes a friend of the no-no boy Ichiro. He understands Ichiro and his problems and admits that even though he is dying slowly, he would not want to change places with Ichiro, that he would not trade his stump for Ichiro's healthy body because of the latter's mental agony. Kenji's father is similar to Mr. Kumasaka in being considerate and friendly. He is described as a man who managed to raise six children by himself. With all the children having now grown up and working in good jobs, he only works a couple of days a week. He lives in a house which is as "American" as the Kumasakas' - large and well furnished. When Mr. Kanno prepares dinner, there are no "eggs, fried with soy sauce, sliced cold meat, boiled cabbage, and tea and rice" (12) being eaten in complete silence as at Ichiro's home but rather "all-American" food: a large roasting chicken from Safeway, salad, lemon meringue pie for dessert, Wm. & Rogers Silverplate on the table. The family chats away over dinner and afterwards watches a baseball game on TV, being joined by other family members who live elsewhere. Stan Yogi points out that if the description of the dinner at the Kannos' is "read without the knowledge that this is a Nikkei family, one would never know that the clan's patriarch is Japanese; the family has thoroughly adopted the behavior and values of the American middle class of that era." Kenji and his father get along very well and respect each other.

The two "American" Japanese American families are the complete opposite of Ichiro's. The family members treat each other with love and respect, and laughter and talk fill the houses. The houses themselves are quite in opposition to Ichiro's home as well: they seem large, cozy, and warm and have nothing of the "hole in the wall" the Yamadas live in. They are American in behavior and seem to fit into an American surrounding perfectly, despite their ethnicity. Ichiro sees what belonging and having a home can be like, but their example is not viable for him yet.

Ichiro's relationship to Kenji is very important in his development. Kenji

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97 The term "Nikkei" refers to people of Japanese descent living in North and South America.
98 Yogi 70.
seems to be his opposite, but he nevertheless does not reject him. Elaine Kim suggests that the two are of a "complementary nature," that neither of them is complete and thus needs the other. Kenji seems to realize that the differences between them are, after all, not significant if even non-existent. Kenji is a key figure in Ichiro's development: apart from some significant conversations, Kenji influences Ichiro's thinking by taking him out to the "Club Oriental" where he protects him against verbal and physical attacks. He also introduces him to Emi and takes him to Portland where Ichiro meets Mr. Carrick. Both encounters are of great importance to Ichiro.

Mr. Carrick is a very sympathetic white man who offers Ichiro a good job as an engineer in Portland. His attitude towards the internment of the Japanese Americans can be considered a "politically correct" one:

The government made a big mistake when they shoved you people around. There was no reason for it. A big black mark in the annals of American history. I mean that. I've always been a big-mouthed, loud-talking, back-slapping American but, when that happened, I lost a little of my wind. I don't feel as proud as I used to, but, if the mistake has been made, maybe we've learned something from it. Let's hope so. We can still be the best damn nation in the world. I'm sorry things worked out the way they did. (150)

Mr. Carrick does not care that Ichiro resisted the draft. He tells him that he feels sorry for him "and for the causes behind the reasons which made you do what you did. It wasn't your fault, really. You know that, don't you?" (152) Ichiro by then does not know the answer to this question, and he feels that he cannot accept the job offer. The meeting, however, makes him think about his situation and makes him realize that the United States was as wrong in interning him and the other Japanese Americans as he was wrong in resisting the draft in defiance. Through his meeting with Mr. Carrick, "he glimpsed the real nature of the country against which he had almost fully turned his back, and saw that its mistake was no less unforgivable than

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99 Kim, Asian American Literature 151.
his own." (153-154) The encounter gives him important insights: he realizes that his father and mother are part of him even though he does not agree with their ideas, that he therefore cannot forget about them and ban them from his life if he ever wishes to achieve a point of "wholeness and belonging." (154-155) He sees that he has to work through his conflict and face his past and his background, and he acknowledges for the first time that in the end there might be a solution for him: "Mr. Carrick had shown him that there was a chance and, for that, he would be ever grateful." (155) There are other people like Mr. Carrick, for example Mr. Morrison who, at a later point, also offers work to Ichiro. Mr. Morrison, however, is a weaker and bleaker version of Mr. Carrick. After his meeting with Mr. Carrick, Ichiro does not feel as hopeless anymore, but he is still on his way to reaching the "wholeness" he is looking for.

Another important person in his search for inner peace is Emi. Emi is a young and attractive Japanese American woman who lives by herself on a pretty farm outside Seattle. Her husband, also a Nisei, volunteered for the U.S. Army and is in Germany. He apparently feels the need to continually prove that he is "American," for he keeps volunteering even though he could have been released by then. Emi is actually the first person who tries to persuade Ichiro that the reasons for his problems are not only to be found with him but in the whole situation as such: when he asks her whether she knows why he has ruined his life, she answers: "It's because we're American and because we're Japanese and sometimes the two don't mix. It's all right to be German and American or Italian and American or Russian and American but, as things turned out, it wasn't all right to be Japanese and American. You had to be one or the other." (91) Her answer then does not convince him, but I think that Emi is, even though Ichiro does not realize it at this point, the ideal impersonation of the "wholeness" he is striving for, the ideal Japanese American. It is true, as Elaine Kim points out, that the women in No-No Boy are not characterized very
elaborately, but they are – as are other smaller characters like Mr. Carrick – nevertheless important. I think that Emi's importance has been underestimated. She does not directly exert influence just by speaking with Ichiro as other characters do, but instead is a living example of what Ichiro should try to achieve. She is not perfect, of course; she is suffering from the effects of the internment and the separation from her husband, and she is incomplete in her own way but she has found a Japanese American identity for herself.

Her house is furnished in an entirely "American" style, and even Emi herself seems to look relatively western: she has "round, dark eyes," is quite tall and is furthermore described as "slender, with heavy breasts." Her "rich, black hair" falls to her shoulders and her "long legs were strong and shapely like a white woman’s." (83) The balance between American and Japanese culture is also reflected in the way Emi dresses: in one scene, while working in her garden, she is wearing "a pair of men's overall pants ... and a heavy athletic sweater with two gold stripes on the arm and an over-sized F on the front." (93) In contrast to this "American" outfit, when she has to say goodbye to Kenji who is leaving for the veterans' hospital in Portland to have his leg treated and to eventually die there, she wears a more Asian dress, a "trim, blue-Shantung dress." (100) But what counts most is her attitude. She can understand almost every position taken in the Japanese(-)American conflict: she understands why her father repatriated to Japan and did not want to stay in the United States and what caused Mike, her brother-in-law, to be a leader in the troublemaking, strikes, and riots in the internment camps and afterwards to go to Japan, too. But she also accepts, even though it hurts her, that her husband Ralph stays in the army because he is so ashamed of Mike. And of course, she fully understands both Ichiro and Kenji. She sees their behavior as different reactions to the anti-Japanese attitudes and politics and is of the opinion that mistakes which were made on either side can be forgotten or corrected. She is – as already mentioned –

100 Kim, *Asian American Literature* 197.
not very successful in convincing Ichiro of this, but towards the end of the book the two of them go dancing and there, for the first time, Ichiro catches a glimpse on how a "normal" life, a life in which ethnicity does not play a role anymore, might be. Dancing with Emi, he wishes that it could always be like this, being free of worries, except maybe the ordinary ones most everybody has about unpaid bills and other minor things. He wonders why it cannot always be like this for him, and finds the answer right away: "It's a matter of attitude. Mine needs changing. I've got to love the world the way I used to. I've got to love it and the people so I'll feel good, and feeling good will make life worthwhile. There's no point in crying about what's done." He decides to do as Emi had advised him when they had met for the first time: to try to be happy and not to be bitter anymore. His new attitude is tested right away: when a white man comes up to their table and buys them a drink for apparently no reason, Ichiro reflects and tries to figure out this behavior. His first guesses are all connected with their being Japanese; maybe the man had Japanese friends before the war, maybe his son was surrounded by Germans fighting in the war and was then liberated by Japanese Americans,¹⁰¹ maybe he is a "Japanese who's lucky enough not to look Japanese and feels sorry everytime he sees a Jap that looks like one." Emi does not let any of the guesses be valid. Only when Ichiro says "I want to think ... that he saw a young couple and liked their looks and felt he wanted to buy them a drink and did." Emi answers affirmatively: "You keep on thinking that. That's how it was." (211)

The negative "Americans" are less important characters. Eto is the first one Ichiro meets. Eto is initially pleased to see Ichiro after so many years but becomes very aggressive when he finds out that Ichiro is a no-no boy. He spits on Ichiro and promises to do worse next time they meet. Ichiro does not get angry, perhaps

¹⁰¹ There are many accounts about the heroic behavior of the 100th Battalion and the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, all-Nisei troops, during WWII. The one which probably is referred to here is how the 442nd Combat Team rescued the Texan "Lost Battalion" which was surrounded by German troops in the Vosges Mountains (see Takaki 400-01).
because he thinks that he deserves it, but only wants to get away as quickly as possible. The next character belonging to this group of negative "Americans" is his own brother, Taro. Taro hates his Ichiro for being a no-no boy and cannot wait to join the army in order to prove that there is one good American in his family. He drops out of high school as soon as he turns eighteen to do so. He even lures his brother into a trap where he almost is beaten up by his friends. Professor Brown, who used to be one of Ichiro's teachers before the war when Ichiro was studying civil engineering, pretends to care about Ichiro when he visits his office trying to find out what to do with his life. But in fact he is simply engaged in small talk, is very non-committal and is likely not concerned at all about Ichiro. The worst and most brutal person whom Ichiro meets is Bull, as indicated by the name. Like Eto, he was a soldier in the U.S. Army, despises all no-no boys and tries to bully and beat them up whenever he can. He always points out that he did not fight in this "'friggin' war for shits like you," meaning, of course, the no-no boys, the "Japanese." (247) He thinks that he is a better American because he has fought in the war and considers the no-no boys a disgrace for people like him who have risked their lives in order to prove that they are American. Japanese Americans like Eto and Bull can be found almost everywhere, as is shown when Ichiro meets a Japanese American waiter in a café in Portland who proudly wears his discharge pin and, upon seeing Ichiro, wants to start a friendly chat, assuming that Ichiro is a vet, too. Ichiro is sick of always having to explain himself, and of people who assume that the fact that he is also Japanese would make them immediate friends unless he tells them the truth about himself. He reacts rather briskly, claims to be Chinese, and then gets out "and away from the place and the young Japanese who had to wear a discharge button on his shirt to prove to everyone who came in that he was a top-flight American." (158)

3. Other no-no boys

Ichiro meets two other no-no boys, the first one being Freddie. Ichiro goes to see
him, hoping that he knows of a solution for their situation. Freddie does not have one, though. His way of dealing with the isolation and discrimination he receives from the Japanese American community is not to care too much about it, and to fight back, if necessary. He tries to ignore his problems and only wants to have fun and make up for the time he spent in prison: "I been havin' a good time. I didn't rot two years without wanting to catch up." (46) He spends most of his time with white women and in gambling halls. He wants to deal with his no-no-boy situation after he has "caught up," but it turns out that he does not have time for it: after having stabbed at Eto for spitting on him, he is hated even more by the ex-vets, and eventually dies in a car crash, trying to flee from a fight with Bull. The other no-no boy Ichiro meets, Gary, is more able to cope with his situation. He, too, lives isolated from the Japanese American community, working for the Christian Rehabilitation Center. He used to be an art student, and for him the internment experience and the imprisonment served as a sort of trigger, making him start to paint seriously. He has found his peace in art, but both of them know that this is not possible for Ichiro. Ichiro nevertheless gains encouragement through their talk, because Gary firmly believes that the situation might change and that maybe one day the difference between the Irish American O'Hara and the Japanese American Ohara will be merely an apostrophe.

On his search for a viable identity for himself, Ichiro thus hardly finds any help among the "Japanese," the "negative Americans," or the other no-no boys. He gets some assistance and sympathy from Kenji and Mr. Carrick, who belong to what I have called the "positive Americans." The problem with this group, however, is that they are all-American: Mr. Carrick is white American, and Kenji believes that total assimilation might be the best solution for Japanese Americans. He advises Ichiro: "Go someplace where there isn't another Jap within a thousand miles. Marry a white girl or a Negro or an Italian or even a Chinese. Anything but a Japanese. After a few generations of that, you've got the thing beat." (164) But Ichiro has realized that
total assimilation would not be suitable for him since this would mean denying his Japanese heritage, which is something he does not want, having realized that it is part of him. He recognizes that he is looking for a truly Japanese American identity, with "Japanese" as a modifying adjective to "American." Ichiro realizes that it is not assimilation that will solve all the problems within the Japanese American community and abolish racism, but the general and global understanding between people of different races and countries. This is mentioned in many different places in the book.

The book ends with no-no boy Freddie's death and a scene in which Bull is crying like "an infant." Ichiro's mother committed suicide at an earlier point in the novel when she had realized that all her hopes and dreams were futile, and Kenji dies of his wound in the hospital. All these characters stand for different opinions, and it is an important sign that in the end they are defeated along with their ideas. Ichiro, in contrary, is alive and on his way to find his Japanese American identity for which Emi is a paradigm.

2. **Louis Chu: *Eat a Bowl of Tea***

Louis Chu was born in China in 1915 and immigrated with his parents to the United States as a boy. He attended high school and college in New Jersey and received an MA from New York University. He worked for New York City's Department of Welfare, became director of the social center, and was also involved in other community work. During WWII he served in the U.S. Army in Southeast Asia. A "well-known figure in New York's Chinatown," he later hosted a radio program and owned a record shop there. He was said to have been "the only Chinese disc jockey in New York City" until his death in 1970. *Eat a Bowl of Tea* was his only novel. It was popular among Chinese Americans but was mostly ignored by literary critics until it was rediscovered by the *Aiiiiieee!*-editors and became the object of closer
The book experienced a second revival in 1989 when it was turned into a film by director Wayne Wang.

a) **Historical Background**

Chinese immigration started earlier and was more numerous than Japanese immigration to the United States. Immigration to the mainland (the situation was a different one in Hawai‘i) started with the gold rush of the 1840s. The Chinese who then went to the United States were called "gam saan haak," travelers to Gold Mountain. After the gold rush, many Chinese worked in quartz mines. While at the gold and quartz mines, they were mostly self-employed, which changed when, beginning in the 1860s, they started working in railroad construction. In fact, 90% of the entire workforce involved in the construction of the Central Pacific Railroad was Chinese.

Like the Japanese, the Chinese immigrants at first considered themselves to be sojourners ("wah gung") who went to America in order to return after three to five years to their Chinese villages as rich men. Often enough, the immigrants did not make enough money to be able to return to China. The conditions for settling down and founding families and communities improved after the immigrants stopped doing migratory work in mines and railroad construction and went to work in industrial production, agriculture, canneries, or started to be self-employed as storekeepers, restaurant owners, or proprietors of laundries. Unlike the Japanese, whose government was on better terms with the American government at that time, the Chinese remained subject to exclusionary immigration laws, and there was nothing like a Gentlemen’s Agreement for them that would have allowed Chinese

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Chan et al., *Aiiieee!* 148.

103 Takaki 84.

104 Due to discrimination it was difficult for Asians to find employment, and thus self-employment often was the only solution. Additionally, the whole family can work in the self-owned business, keeping labor costs at minimum level. Today, members of recent immigrant groups from Asia still often open up groceries, beauty parlors, wig shops, etc.
women into the country. The result was an intense shortage of Chinese women and huge "bachelor societies," communities which consisted almost entirely of (aging) men. This changed only slowly when the National Origins Act which, among other things, prohibited Asian women and even wives from entering the United States, was lifted in 1943 and the War Brides Act was enforced in 1945. The latter allowed Chinese wives and children to come to the United States to join their husbands and fathers.

b) Short Summary

*Eat a Bowl of Tea* takes place at exactly this point of time, during the transition from a bachelor society to a more normal family-based community. The novel is set in New York's Chinatown of 1948. Wang Wah Gay, an old Chinese immigrant who runs a small gambling place called the "Money Come," in Chinatown, decides that it is time that his son Ben Loy, who had come to the United States a couple of years earlier and works as a waiter in a Chinese restaurant in Connecticut, gets married. He wants him to marry a girl from China and thinks that the daughter of his old friend Lee Gong, who also lives in Chinatown and who came to the United States on the same ship as he did, might be the right choice. Wah Gay and Lee Gong inform their wives, who live in adjacent villages in China, of their idea, and Ben Loy is sent to China to meet his prospective wife. At first everything seems perfect: Mei Oi is delighted at the prospect of marrying a young and attractive "gimshunhock" (Gold Mountain sojourner). Ben Loy, who at first was a little reluctant about entering into an arranged marriage, is pleased to find such a beautiful and educated girl as Mei Oi for his bride. They marry in China, then spend their honeymoon in Hong Kong, and eventually arrive in New York. The trouble starts as soon as they arrive in Hong Kong: Ben Loy, who in China did not experience any of these problems, turns out to be impotent and remains in this state throughout most of the novel. In New York, Mei Oi gets more and more frustrated. In addition, she becomes bored because her husband will not allow her to work and she does not have any friends or family with
whom she could spend time. Her father is of no great help since he is more or less like a stranger for her: she had never seen him before she came to New York because he had left their village before she was born. Being frustrated and bored, Mei Oi is soon seduced by Ah Song, who is a friend of her father's and father-in-law's and is known as a "wife-stealer." Soon everybody knows about their affair, Mei Oi becomes pregnant, and the consequences have to be faced. Wah Gay slashes off a piece of Ah Song's ear when he sees him leaving his son's apartment while Ben Loy is at work. Ah Song wants to sue Wah Gay but has to give up this plan when the Wang Association, a Chinatown tong both he and Wah Gay are members of, intervenes. Ah Song is banned from New York by the Association, and Wah Gay and Lee Gong also leave New York and move elsewhere because "[t]he shame is too great." (229) The young couple moves away from New York as well, settling in San Francisco. There they make up, Mei Oi has her baby, which is loved by her husband as if it were his own, and there Ben Loy eventually regains his potency by "eating" bowls of tea at a herbalist's.

c) Identity Conflict
Here the identity conflict stems from a generational conflict, from a clash between old traditions and values and a life in a "new" world. The old Chinatown "bachelors" have retired from their jobs as laundry men or waiters and now spend their time gambling and hanging out talking and gossiping. They are isolated from contemporary American society, and their only contact to contemporary China consists of the letters they exchange with their wives, whom they have not seen for about two decades. They thus do not know contemporary family life, neither from observing American families nor from their own experience. All they know are traditions, codes of behavior, and conventions from their own youth, and they transplant these directly from the old China, a China that does not exist in that form anymore, to New York Chinatown. They fiercely cling to their old-fashioned opinions, but at the same time they have a double standard. While they themselves
lived a rather "loose" life when they were younger, frequenting prostitutes and gambling parlors, and – due to their absence from their families – unable to fulfill their roles as husbands and fathers, they expect their children to be morally pure and to be perfect children and spouses.

So when Mei Oi and Ben Loy get married, the two fathers, Lee Gong and Wah Gay, are quite content being the ones who arranged the marriage and having celebrated it according to custom in a Chinatown wedding banquet. They now expect grandchildren rather than difficulties. It seems, however, as if all their sins and the neglect of their wives and children now take their toll.

The "bachelors" know, for example, only two categories of women: their wives who faithfully wait for their return in their Chinese villages and the prostitutes they frequented when they were younger. For them, the two categories are two entirely different worlds: the first is appreciated and honored (at least most of the time), the second is lusted after but morally despised. Due to their long separation from their wives, they might have forgotten that a wife usually is a sexual partner, too, and not only the "rice cooker" they remember. Even though he is of another generation, Ben Loy has followed their example his relationships to women. He, too, was a frequent customer of prostitutes before he was married. Being married, he soon becomes impotent and is, like the old "bachelors," unable to make love to his wife.

So when Mei Oi appears on the scene, she causes confusion among the bachelor society. At first, the old men see in her the beautiful but pure and diligent young woman who, just like their wives, will soon be the mother of some nice little children. Ben Loy thinks the same, but although he is in love, does not really realize that his wife has her own personality and needs to be taken seriously. Mei Oi soon gets bored, sitting alone in her Chinatown apartment while her husband works as a waiter. She wants to get herself a job but is not allowed to do so by her husband: "When a group of women get together ... they do nothing but gossip. And when
they do, there's bound to be trouble." (80) Similarly, he refuses to discuss his impotence with her. Mei Oi, bored and frustrated, therefore does not resist for long when Ah Song, the well-known womanizer, appears at her doorstep to seduce her while Ben Loy is at work. Quite the contrary, she even becomes an active part of their relationship, looking forward to his visits and encouraging them. She turns from a *femme fragile*, a nice and shy eighteen-year-old who was brought to a big city like New York, into a seductive and inscrutable *femme fatale* who is aware of her qualities and desires. In her second role she can even be seen, as among others Jeffery Chan points out, as a "comic revenge perpetrated by the wives who remained in the villages of Kwantung while their husbands played mah jong in New York."\(^{105}\)

Mei Oi becomes pregnant and at first everyone is pleased. However, when the gossip about her and Ah Song cannot be ignored anymore, the events reach a climax in the ear-slashing scene. After this, it remains unclear for a while what will happen, while the Wang Association then takes care of Ah Song, and the two fathers decide to leave New York as well. The big question is what will become of the young couple. Theoretically, Ben Loy can disown his wife for her infidelity, and that would be the traditional thing to do. The reader learns this or is reminded of it in the scene where Ben Loy listens to a well-known Cantonese opera while he is in the barbershop waiting to get a haircut. It is *Gim Peng Moy*, a classic about an infidel housewife by the same name. But Ben Loy does not disown Mei Oi and instead decides to remain with his wife. He even accepts the child as his own. They move to San Francisco Chinatown to start anew, and things seem to improve: Ben Loy starts talking about his problems with his wife, and she no longer feels bitter about his impotence but is understanding and full of sympathy. In the last scene of the book, Ben Loy has lost his impotence, and the two are planning to invite their fathers for the haircut party of their second baby.

\(^{105}\) Chan, introduction 5.
d) Solution

It is important that this change in the relationship between Ben Loy and Mei Oi and the cure of Ben Loy's impotence could only happen after the two have left the confining borders of New York's Chinatown and the influence of their fathers, the influence of a patriarchal society. By accepting Mei Oi's infidelity and her "love child," Ben Loy acts against all traditions which are, in this case, represented by some well-meaning but incapable fathers and the other old men of Chinatown. By doing this, he shows a more progressive and more appropriate attitude. As Jinqi Ling writes: "The central action of the novel concerns the unraveling of the elders' negotiations, followed by recognition on the part of both bride and groom that their relationship must be renegotiated on a non-traditional basis." 106 Ling is of the opinion that the changes in the young couple's relationship "signify the crumbling of the old bachelor order, increased freedom for the new generation, and the beginning ... of Chinese-American community in the United States built around family life and children." 107

Chu's novel is read by many critics as the first expression of an Asian American or, more specifically, a Chinese American sensibility. In contrast to earlier depictions of Chinatowns in Chinese American literature, Chu's description is considered authentic and realistic. 108 The novel's criticism of such anachronisms as patriarchy and the establishment of a new, seemingly antipatriarchal Chinese American identity embodied by a new generation made it "the herald of the new Asian American sensibility." 109 A feature of this new sensibility would be to not submit entirely to the new (American) culture, but also to not cling to the old (Chinese) one. Ben Loy's impotence is cured by the emancipation from the old values represented by his father and the other "bachelors" and by starting a new and

107 J. Ling 46.
109 Ruth Y. Hsiao, "Facing the Incurable: Patriarchy in Eat a Bowl of Tea," *Reading the Literatures of Asian America,*
modern life, but it is also cured by "eating tea," a traditional and old-fashioned medical practice. He thus abandoned those features of Chinese culture which have become useless for his present situation, but he has kept others which are still valuable.

However, it remains an open question whether or not the young family really does find a proper home and place to belong to the United States while living in San Francisco's Chinatown. In the life of their fathers, the United States and their population are almost entirely hidden. They hardly play a role at all since Chinatown seems to be self-sufficient and the focus is on conflicts taking place among Chinese only. Since the couple moves to another Chinatown, they might remain isolated from American society. On the other hand, the ending of the novel sounds so optimistic that really anything seems possible. Additionally, they managed, in contrast to their fathers, to have a family, the first step to a more normal and settled life.

3. Okada, Chu, and the Aiiieeee!-editors: Asian American Realism
With their anti-nostalgic ways of writing, and realistic, unromanticizing description of Japanese or Chinese American life, as the case may be, John Okada and Louis Chu "mark the beginning of the tradition of realism in Asian American writing." This realism was later continued by the works of, among others, Frank Chin and Jeffery Chan who politicized it more. Among the typical elements of the tradition of realism is the use of a very specific language. For his dialogues, Okada uses a vernacular as it might have been used among young Japanese Americans in the late 1940s. His use of unconventional language was poorly received by many critics of his time, but was later celebrated by the Aiiieeee!-editors as the development of a "new language out of old words." The Aiiieeee!-editors state: "John Okada writes from an oral tradition he

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110 Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Twelve Asian American Writers: In Search of Self-Definition, Redefining American
hears all the time, and talks his writing onto the page. To judge Okada's writing by
the white criterion of silent reading of the printed word is wrong. Listen as you read
Okada or any other Asian American writer."\textsuperscript{111} Similarly, Chu also develops a very
specific language. He "makes English out of Cantonese." His language is "active and
direct, filled with curses as a product of the predominantly male society, where
abstractions are made concrete and literal." His language was also found
inappropriate by many critics of his time.\textsuperscript{112} Dialogues like the following between
some of the old men in the Money Come club are very common throughout the
novel and contribute to the comic atmosphere of the book. Chong Loo, the rent
collector, wants to gossip, but the other men are not too responsive:

"Did you see the pugilist master at the Sun Young Theater last night?" he
grinned, showing his new set of teeth. The last time he had come around, he
had not a single tooth.
"Wow your mother," said Ah Song, a hanger-on at the club house. "Go sell
your ass." ...
"Remember a year ago some Lao Tsuey ran down to South Carolina with Loa
Ning's wife? She's the niece of the president of the Bank of Kwai Chow,"
Chong Loo persisted. "Have you heard the latest about...?"
"Wow your mother," said Ah Song, this time a little louder than before.
Across from Ah Song, sitting on the couch, the proprietor, Wang Wah Gay,
smiled his agreement. "You many-mouthed bird, go sell your ass." (15-16)

A wronged husband "wears a green hat" and a playboy lives the "Life of the Peach
Blossoms," all expressions which were well-known to Chinese Americans of that
time and which also can be understood by non-Chinese readers.\textsuperscript{113}

The emphasis on the special and specific languages used by Okada and Chu
contributes of course to the nation-building the \textit{Aiieeeeee!}-editors were doing at the
time. At later points in U.S.-American literature, for instance examples can be found

\textsuperscript{111} Chan et al., "Fifty Years of Our Whole Voice" 20-30.
\textsuperscript{112} Chan, introduction 2.
\textsuperscript{113} Since these and other typically Chinese/Cantonese expressions can be understood by non-Chinese
readers without greater difficulties in the context in which they are used, I disagree with Li (Li 102-103), who
is of the opinion that footnoting is necessary for a full understanding of Chu's novel.
e.g. in Chicano/a literature. Another thing the two books have in common is that they both allude to traditional tales. While Okada incorporated the story of Momotaro, the Peach Boy, Chu borrows from *The Water Margin* and the *wuxia*, which are martial arts romances.

Both novels are said to reflect or even define a specific, Asian American sentiment. They depict "real" Asian Americans and not the stereotypes of some earlier Asian American works. Their description of an Asian American sentiment is, however, more or less limited to Asian American men. While in Okada's novel women are only marginal and everything is centered on the feelings and actions of his male main character, Chu does have a kind of heroine in his book. The character of Mei Oi has often been criticized, though. From a feminist point of view the birth of a "new Asian American sensibility" is, as Ruth Hsiao points out, not entirely completed in Chu's novel. She acknowledges that he started a tradition of anti-patriarchal, anti-Confucian Chinese American writing which still continues today and that his novel is a criticism of racially oppressive laws. She also points out that he gives a voice to women by creating the character of Mei Oi and thereby raises the important issue of misogyny within patriarchal societies. But Ruth Hsiao as well as Elaine Kim criticize the character of Mei Oi, who supposedly does not have an inner dimension. Hsiao states that Chu "both liberates [Mei Oi] from and imprisons [her] in traditional ideas of womanhood. Although he gives Mei Oi the role of discrediting and humiliating patriarchy, he does not entirely transcend his male view of women. ... He metes out freedoms to Mei Oi with one hand and takes them back with the other." Mei Oi "has no self-understanding and is solely propelled by vanity," and this in addition to her physical descriptions demonstrates that "both the

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116 Hsiao 159.
Western and the Chinese patriarchal caricatures of Asian women" are adopted.\textsuperscript{117} Hsiao does not blame Chu for this, though, stating that as a patriarchal and heterosexual man, he must have found it quite difficult at the time to find a solution other than letting Ben Loy regain his potency and start a "new-generation patriarchy" in another town, with a baby boy and a beautiful and now tamed wife at his side. Besides, it was probably not his intention to write a feminist book. Hsiao writes: "For a fuller portrait of Asian American women we have to wait for later writers - women writers - to reveal the struggle and confusion that crossing cultural boundaries could generate in the female psyche."\textsuperscript{118} One of these female writers Hsiao has in mind is certainly Maxine Hong Kingston. Kingston's work contrasts with the previously discussed novels in many ways.

\section*{B. Maxine Hong Kingston: Of Women Warriors and China Men}

Maxine Hong Kingston is probably one of the best-known and most discussed Asian American writers in the history of Asian American literature up to now. She was born in 1940 in Stockton, California, and graduated from the University of California at Berkeley. She has written three novels, \textit{The Woman Warrior} (1976), \textit{China Men} (1980), and \textit{Tripmaster Monkey} (1989). A fourth novel is forthcoming. Maxine Hong Kingston currently teaches at UC Berkeley.

\section*{1. Authenticity and Fiction}

In the following, Kingston's first two novels will be dealt with. The two books are very closely connected, and in fact, Kingston sees them as "one big book." She states: "I was writing them more or less simultaneously. The final chapter in 'China Men' began as a short story that I was working on before I even started 'The Woman

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Both books are what can be called "autobiographical fiction;" the former deals with the female perspective of a second-generation Chinese as Kingston herself is, the latter with the Chinese American experiences of four-generations of men of Kingston's family. In *The Woman Warrior*, which is aptly subtitled *Memoirs of a girlhood among ghosts*, the narrator tells the reader about her childhood memories, about situations in her youth she considers worth telling. All the memories have to do with growing up as the daughter of Chinese parents in the United States, and they are mingled with the narrator's versions of some old Chinese tales.

In *China Men* we re-encounter the same narrator. Again, adapted versions of Chinese tales alternate with her stories. This time the stories deal with the American experiences of her male relatives. Most of the characters occur in both books, and their stories are similar as well. Since both books are autobiographical fiction, I will call their nameless narrator "Maxine."

The literary discussions of the books mostly revolve about the relations between "reality" and fiction: *The Woman Warrior* has been sold as autobiography, and *China Men* has been sometimes classified as "nonfiction." This makes some critics and readers expect authenticity, "truth," and a book of representative character. Elaine Kim notices that while Asian American autobiographies are considered representative, at the same time nobody would ever consider a given autobiography by a white American as representative for all European Americans. She explains that "because Asian Americans have been unfamiliar to most American readers, their visions and expressions are sometimes erroneously generalized." She presents a little anecdote to illustrate the absurdity of generalizations: "I recall the annoyance felt by a friend of mine when her non-Asian friends presented her with a copy of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, saying, 'Now I finally understand you.'"120

Stephen Sumida points out that due to the "negative" past of Chinese

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120 Kim, *Asian American Literature* xix.
American autobiography, referring to any work of Asian American literature as "autobiography" implies trouble. Older autobiographies, as mentioned in the *Aiiieeee!* chapter, were considered representative and each weakness or confession stated in them seemed to be a sign of the inferiority of the "heathens" to the white Christian society. Autobiographies were often written to please the white audience and meet its expectations and prejudices. Sumida summarizes some of the criticism which arose upon the publication of *The Woman Warrior* by stating that

some Asian American writers and literary critics, notably Frank Chin and his fellow editors of *Aiiieeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* (1974), were raising questions about how Asian American first-person narratives affirmed, suggested ignorance of, or were indifferent to cultures and literary histories not only of racist depictions of Asians but also of coaching books and converts' autobiographies and the like.\(^{121}\)

Frank Chin himself expresses his opinion of Maxine Hong Kingston's works more radically. He sees her writing in line with the works written by converted "Christian Chinese" in that she, too, is "perpetuating and advancing the stereotype of a Chinese culture so foul, so cruel to women, so perverse, that good Chinese are driven by the moral imperative to kill it."\(^{122}\) He blames her of reinforcing the stereotypes about Chinese in the eyes of the non-Chinese reader. What he criticizes most is the way Kingston describes Chinese men, the relations between men and women in Chinese American society, and the way in which she uses old Chinese myths and legends to illustrate her work. Chin claims that she is "faking" those old tales by altering them so that they fit into her stories.

As an example, he presents the original Chinese ballad of Fa Mu Lan, which Kingston changed and incorporated into her novel, as well as an English translation of the tale as proof that the real Fa Mu Lan is not like the one in Kingston's novel at


\(^{122}\) Chin "Come all ye..." 3-11.
However, by criticizing Kingston for her "inauthenticity," Chin is ignoring the artistic freedom of a writer to mingle fact and fiction and history and myth. He also ignores the possibility that her view on Chinese American history and society might be very different from his simply because she is a woman and therefore has experiences and feelings different from his. King-Kok Cheung writes in defense of Maxine Hong Kingston as well as of Alice Walker, who has also been blamed for giving a distorted view of her own ethnic group:

Walker and Kingston do draw heavily on their cultures, but they are not cultural historians, nor are they committed to a purely realistic fictional form. On the contrary, they are feminist writers who seek to "re-vision" history (to borrow Adrienne Rich's word). If they are to be nurtured by their cultural inheritance rather than smothered by it, they must learn to reshape recalcitrant myths glorifying patriarchal values.124

Kingston herself makes a clear statement asking, in the beginning of *The Woman Warrior*, "Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is in the movies?" (13) She precisely points out one of the problems Asian Americans have and the problematic nature of the novels themselves: How is one to distinguish between personal experiences based on an Asian background, and between versions of stories one has heard and the "real" traditions and "original" tales? Finally, the way the stories (the old and the new ones) are told within the book clearly emphasize its own subjective viewpoint: the narrator in *The Woman Warrior* is a young girl who retells tales and events the way she sees them or understood them or even the way they fit into her concept of reality. Another argument for the subjectivity present in the novel is the fact that the oral tradition plays a significant role. Especially in *The Woman Warrior*, a lot of what is

123 Chin, "Come all ye..." 5-6.
called "talk-story" takes place. Maxine gets to know most of the old tales as well as the stories about her Chinese relatives through her mother, who is a "champion talker." (180)

Maxine tells us about her mother and her stories:

Whenever she had to warn us about life, my mother told stories that run like this one [Maxine has started to menstruate and so her mother tells her the tragic story of an aunt who got pregnant with an illegitimate child to warn her about unwanted pregnancy], a story to grow up on. Those in the emigrant generations who could not reassert brute survival died young and far from home. Those of us in the first American generations have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America. (13)

One task Maxine has to face, therefore, is the translating of the Chinese stories she is told into an American context so that she can make sense of them and they can help her in her American life. And indeed, her mother's stories do encourage her. As a child, Maxine often feels discriminated against as a girl by immigrants in whose view a boy is still worth more. Her great-uncle, for example, would look at all the girls at the dinner table when Maxine and her two sisters would visit her three female cousins and shout "'Maggots! ... Maggots! Where are my grandsons? I want grandsons!' He pointed at each one of us, 'Maggot! Maggot! Maggot! Maggot! Maggot! Maggot!' Then he dived into his food, eating fast and getting seconds. 'Eat, maggots,' he said. 'Look at the maggots chew.'" (171) Sayings like "It is more profitable to raise geese than daughters" are stuck in her mind. Her mother's talk-stories, however, would inspire her to think of women as worthy and heroic: "At last I saw that I too had been in the presence of great power, my mother talking-story. ... She said I would grow up a wife and slave, but she taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan." (26)

a) The Legend of Fa Mu Lan: About Swords and Words

Next follows Maxine's version of the legend of the woman warrior Fa Mu Lan, which
indeed is a variation of the original tale. In the original, Fa Mu Lan is a daughter who, disguised as a man, successfully fights in a war in place of her old father, and then after 12 years of war happily returns to her family and village.

Kingston has embellished the story quite a bit. In her version, narrated by Maxine in the first person, Fa Mu Lan, as in a Kung Fu movie, first has to go through a hard training and initiation rite in the mountains, where an old couple teaches her to live in harmony with nature and helps her to acquire almost supernatural powers. The training lasts 15 years, and afterwards Fa Mu Lan knows all the hiding and fighting skills of the animals around her; she even learned "tiger and dragon ways." So now that she is so well trained that "I could control even the dilations of the pupils in my irises ... the deer let me run beside them. I could jump twenty feet into the air from a standstill." She returns home ready to fight evil and joins the army in place of her old father who had been drafted. Before she leaves her home, her parents tattoo her entire back with "revenge," "oaths," and "names." They write down all their grievances. Here Kingston brings in another Chinese tale, the story of Yueh Fei. Yueh Fei is a male warrior whose back is tattooed by his mother before he leaves for battle. After the wounds from the tattoos are healed, Fa Mu Lan and a growing army of soldiers move across China to fight giants and other evil forces sent by the wicked emperor. She meets her childhood friend, who had married her while she was away at the old couples' house, completing her training. He is one of the soldiers of her army and the only one who recognizes her and knows that she is a woman. After a while Fa Mu Lan even gives birth to a boy, but she sends him and the father away to their families when he is a month old because she considers the battlefield unfit for an infant. In the end, after having killed the emperor and inaugurated a peasant "who would begin the new order," Fa Mu Lan also kills the bad baron who had tyrannized her village and turned its people into slaves or let them starve. In this scene, it is very obvious that this version of the legend of Fa Mu Lan originates

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125 Cheung 177.
from Maxine's imagination:

Carrying the news about the new emperor, I went home, where one more battle awaited me. The baron who had drafted my brother would still be bearing sway over our village. Having dropped my soldiers off at crossroads and bridges, I attacked the baron's stronghold alone. ... When no one accosted me, I sheathed the swords and walked about like a guest until I found the baron. He was counting his money, his fat ringed fingers playing over the abacus.

'Who are you? What do you want?' he said, encircling his profits with his arms. ...

'I'm a female avenger.'

Then - heaven help him - he tried to be charming, to appeal to me man to man. 'Oh, come now. Everybody takes the girls when he can. The families are glad to be rid of them. "Girls are maggots in the rice." It is more profitable to raise geese than daughters." He quoted to me the sayings I hated. (45)

Evidently Maxine and Fa Mu Lan hate the same sayings. The baron is beheaded by Fa Mu Lan. After she has finished her mission, her "public duties," she is ready to become a normal housewife and mother.

Maxine sees close parallels between herself and Fa Mu Lan:

The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them. What we have in common are the words at our backs. The idioms for revenge are 'report a crime' and 'report to five families.' The reporting is the vengeance - not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words. And I have so many words - 'chink' words and 'gook' words too - that they do not fit on my skin. (53)

The woman warrior Fa Mu Lan is Maxine's heroine. She would like to be like her in her "American" life, not fighting giants and barons but racial and sexual discrimination. She wants to have Mu Lan's supernatural powers so that she is no longer merely a weak Chinese girl who can be sold or married off (two of her biggest fears). Her weapons, though, cannot be swords but words. For Maxine the way is long, though, because she does not have any tutors. She has to learn to talk, to express herself, before she herself can talk-story as well, and – to enter the
autobiographical level – eventually to become the writer Maxine Hong Kingston. Talking in public is, at first, very difficult for Maxine. She is not confident about her English at school and does not dare to speak up in class. So she "flunked kindergarten and in the first grade had no IQ - a zero IQ" (164) and is considered retarded by her teachers. But she sees the need to talk, to express herself: "I thought talking and not talking made the difference between sanity and insanity. Insane people were the ones who couldn't explain themselves." (166) Since Maxine is terribly scared about ending up like the many "crazy women" she has seen,\textsuperscript{126} she works hard to improve her talking skills and succeeds. When she suspects that her parents are trying to marry her and her sister off, she has a vocal outburst and screams out, among other things, the following:

I'm going away anyway. I am. Do you hear me? I may be ugly and clumsy, but one thing I'm not, I'm not retarded. There's nothing wrong with my brain. Do you know what the Teacher Ghosts\textsuperscript{127} say about me? They tell me I'm smart, and I can win scholarships. I can get into colleges. I've applied. I'm smart. I can do all kinds of things. I know how to get As, and they say I could be a scientist or a mathematician if I want. I can make a living and take care of myself. ... I'm so smart, if they say write ten pages, I can write fifteen. I can do ghost things even better than ghosts can. Not everybody thinks I'm nothing. I'm not going to be a slave or a wife. ... I'm getting out of here. I can't stand living here any more. It's your fault I talk weird. The only reason I flunked kindergarten was because you couldn't teach me English, and you gave me a zero IQ. I've brought my IQ up, though. ... I'm going to get scholarships, and I'm going away. And at college I'll have the people I like for friends. I don't care if they were our enemies in China four thousand years ago. ... And I'm not going to Chinese school any more. I'm going to run for office at American

\textsuperscript{126} The "crazy lady" is a popular motif in Asian American literature. There are many works with mad women in them. One of the nicest is maybe Hisaye Yamamoto's short story "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara" (anthologized, for example, in The Big Aiiieee!). On crazy ladies in Asian American literature see, for example, Kim, \textit{Asian American Literature} 253-55. A recent variation of the "crazy lady" can be found in Nora Okja Keller's amazing first novel \textit{Comfort Woman}.

\textsuperscript{127} Kingston translates the word "gwai" that is used in a dialect of Cantonese called Say Yup as "ghost." Many critics say that it refers to white people. Jeffery Chan claims that Kingston, in the tradition of Christian missionaries, mistranslates the word, and that it actually means "asshole." (Kim, \textit{Asian American Literature} 310) He implies that she deliberately chose "ghost" not to offend her (white) readers and to be more exotic at the same time. Several speakers of Cantonese told me that both translations can be right; that in fact there is no specific translation, and that "gwai" is a pejorative word meaning "that one," in the sense of "the other, the different one." It is up to the user, how pejorative it is meant to be.
school, and I'm going to join clubs. ... And I don't want to listen to any more of your stories; they have no logic. They scramble me up. You lie with stories. You won't tell me a story and then say, 'This is a true story,' or, 'This is just a story.' I can't tell the difference. ... I can't tell what's real and what you make up. (180)

This monologue is of equal significance as Ichiro's in terms of the development of the main character's idea of identity and is therefore also quoted in full. Here, Maxine makes her position clear for the time being. She aims at being more American than Chinese, pointing out that she can "outwhite the whites" or, in her own words, "do ghost things even better than ghosts can." She gets along very well in her "American life" and therefore is able to leave her Chinese background behind.

The monologue is also an attack on her mother's talk-stories. Just like the reader who does not know which of Maxine's stories are authentic and true and which are made up, Maxine is confused by her mother's stories and longs for simple and unambiguous answers and accounts. Maxine often misunderstands her mother. One example is when Maxine claims that her mother has cut her frenum in an attempt to cut off her tongue and silence her (180), but her mother replies that she "fixed" the tongue so that, quite the contrary, Maxine would be able to talk better, that she would not be "tongue-tied." Readers then have to find out for themselves whether this is an autobiographical fact or plain fiction. King-Kok Cheung points out that she has never heard of the habit of cutting the frenum in any Chinese or Chinese American family, and concludes that either Maxine's mother is a very unusual woman or that Maxine has made up the incident. Examples like this can be found throughout the whole book, and they make it very clear that Kingston does not intend to be representative and that her subjectivity is very explicit.

b) Identity in The Woman Warrior: Singing to Foreign Music
Regarding Maxine's Chinese American identity, it has to be pointed out that she does

128 Cheung 186.
not maintain the position she takes in the monologue quoted above. She does not continue her rejection of all things Chinese. The monologue is a reaction to the many things in Chinese culture Maxine does not understand or dislikes, and it reflects her conflict between her "American" life and her "Chinese" life and the generational conflict with her parents. After she has grown up, Maxine sees things differently; she has found a way to reconcile the two cultures and the two generations, and she has found a way to deal with talk-stories and her position as a Chinese American woman. The book ends with a story of which Maxine says: "Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also am a story-talker. The beginning is hers, the ending, mine." (184) What follows is a reinterpretation of the legend of Ts'ai Yen. Ts'ai Yen is a poet who is robbed by barbarians and has to live among them. She bears two children who do not speak Chinese, even though she tries to teach them. She considers the barbarians to be primitives and the sound their arrows make in battle their only music, but one night she hears them blow reed pipes. The sound disturbs her deeply, and she cannot sleep or concentrate anymore. Ts'ai Yen eventually solves the problem by singing along in a way that matches the flutes. Even though the words she uses are Chinese, the barbarians understand the feelings expressed in them, and sometimes they even think they can hear some barbarian phrases. Her children start singing along, and all the barbarians are listening. After 12 years, Ts'ai Yen is ransomed. She brings the songs she made up while living among the barbarians with her, and they are still passed on from one Chinese generation to the next. Maxine's story and with it Kingston's book end as follows: "...one of the three [songs] that has been passed down to us is 'Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,' a song that Chinese sing to their own instruments. It translated well." (186)

In Kingston's version of this legend, "interethnic harmony through the integration of disparate art forms" is stressed, while the original version lays emphasis on the "irreconciliability of the different ways of life," the "Confucian concept of
loyalty to one's ancestral family and state," and the "superiority of Chinese civilization." Instead of choosing one culture only, Kingston decides to "sing to foreign music," as she has discovered that there can be – despite of all differences – intercultural harmony. Maxine finishes the story in a way her mother would never have been able to. She puts it into a different, an American, context. This intercultural harmony can be found throughout Kingston's work. It is visible in the way she transforms Chinese legends into Chinese American ones, or in her use of language. As King-Kok Cheung aptly puts it, Kingston invents from her "mother tongue - her Chinese heritage ... tales that sustain and affirm her Chinese American identity."  

2. "Claiming America": *China Men*  
In *China Men*, Kingston again mixes old Chinese legends and family stories, but this time the male members of Maxine's family are the center of attention. Maxine, however, is still the storyteller; both the legends and the "factual" material are told from her perspective. With regard to this narrative technique, Kingston explains the difference between the two books as follows: "In a way, 'The Woman Warrior' was a selfish book. I was always imposing my viewpoint on the stories. In 'China Men' the person who 'talks story' is not so intrusive. I bring myself in and out of the stories, but in effect, I'm more distant."

a) History and Myth  
Again, it should be clear that since everything is told from the perspective of a storyteller, everything is highly subjective. Once more, Kingston alters traditional Chinese tales, but this time she draws clear boundaries between the "real" stories and the tales, separating them into different chapters. In the table of contents, the headlines of the "tales" are written in italics, while the headlines of the "real" stories

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129 Cheung 182.  
130 Cheung 178.  
131 Pfaff 26.
are written in capital letters. On the use of legends and myths in this book, Kingston says: "This time I'm leaving it to my readers to figure out how the myths and the modern stories connect. Like me, and I'm assuming like other people, the characters in the book have to figure out how what they've been told connects - or doesn't connect - with what they experience." On the use of tales in her fiction in general, she says: "We have to do more than record myths. That's just more ancestor worship. The way I keep the old Chinese myths alive is by telling them in a new American way."^{132}

In this work not all of the tales are old Chinese ones; there is also a "Chinese version" of the story of Robinson Crusoe ("The Adventures of Lo Bun Sun") and a story about a "wild" man, a "crazy" Chinese who was found living in the swamps of Florida in 1975. Kingston seems to be inconsistent in distinguishing between tales and reality. She, for example, marks a section on "Alaska China Men" with italics as a tale, when in fact it is a short historical summary of the early Chinese American experience in Alaska. A section titled "The Laws," found right in the middle of the book, is also headlined in italics even though it is the only part of the book which consists of plain facts. In it, Kingston chronologically lists all laws concerning Chinese Americans, starting in 1868 and ending in 1978. She pretends to keep tales and "real stories" apart in different chapters, but stresses at the same time the relativity of what can be considered fiction and reality by deliberately mixing up the labeling established for the chapters.

b) History and Fiction
Indeed, when reading the "modern stories," it becomes evident to the reader that they cannot be the "full truth." For instance, Maxine gives five different versions about how her father came to the United States. Also, to someone familiar with Chinese American history, it soon becomes clear that the stories of Kingston's *China Men* do closely correspond with what is known about the fate of Chinese men in the

^{132} Pfaff 26.

In *China Men*, Kingston's male relatives appear in all roles Chinese American men played in Chinese American history: her maternal great-grandfather works in the sugarcane fields of Hawaii, her paternal grandfather helps build the railroad in the Sierra Nevada mountains, and her great-uncles sell vegetables on the street. We are told different versions of how Maxine's father, who runs a laundry and previously owned a gambling parlor, immigrated to the United States. In one version, he immigrated to the United States legally, in another, he came on a boat and was smuggled in, and in a third, he arrived as a "paper son" via Angel Island.134 All three ways of entering the United States were typical around the beginning of this century. A brother joins the war in Vietnam. Other specifics of and influences on Chinese American life such as the bachelor society, the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, and "driving outs"135 are mentioned, and where appropriate examples cannot be found in the immediate family, Maxine instead tells us about distant cousins or even about strangers (as, for example, in "Alaska China Men"). All of the information Kingston gives us can likewise be found in the corresponding history books. Like many other Chinese men at his time, Maxine's grandfather hangs in a wicker basket high up on a cliffside, putting explosives into inaccessible parts of mountains so that the railroad

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133 It would be interesting to discover whether Takaki, who has obviously read Kingston's book because he quotes it several times, was indeed inspired by it or if the two were just using the same historical sources.

134 After the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, all official town records were destroyed, thus leaving no official documents on the Chinese immigrants and families. Many Chinese used this possibility to invent "sons" who then gained the right to immigrate into the United States. The usual procedure was that the "paper son" would pay his "father" for opening up the opportunity to immigrate and in return received the latter's full "family details" written on paper (hence "paper sons") so that he could memorize them and present them correctly at the immigration office at Angel Island.

135 It used to happen quite frequently that white population drove out Chinese. Besides racism, the reason was usually that Chinese were cheaper workers and thus seemingly posed a threat.
can find its way through them. Kingston nevertheless often embellishes the facts extensively. In one instance, for example, the grandfather urinates overboard from his basket and while doing so shouts "I'm a waterfall." She also claims that "[o]ne beautiful day, dangling in the sun above a new valley, not the desire to urinate but sexual desire clutched him so hard he bent over in the basket. He curled up, overcome by beauty and fear, which shot to his penis. He tried to rub himself calm. Suddenly he stood up and squirted out into space. 'I am fucking the world,' he said." (132-133) With her characters, Kingston retells Chinese American history. She uses historical facts to illustrate them, bringing them to life and showing their human and personal aspects. It is likely that many readers of China Men do not know much about Chinese American history. Thus, readers learn about Chinese American history, but at the same time are constantly reminded that this history was made by individuals and not by a faceless mass of people. I do not think that anybody would consider the grandfather in the wicker basket representative; his job is a typical one, but his personality and imagination are certainly unique. This then leads to the next aspect: the way in which Kingston depicts Chinese American men.

c) **Maxine's Perspective on "China Men"**

At the beginning of the book the story of Tang Ao is told, who "looking for the Gold Mountain, crossed an ocean, and came upon the Land of Women." There, instead of finding gold and becoming rich, he is turned into a woman. Like the legend of Fa Mu Lan, the one of Tang Ao is slightly changed by Kingston: it is not Tang Ao himself, but his brother-in-law who arrives in the Country of Women. In any case, the feminization of this Tang Ao "acts metonymically for the emasculation of China Men in white America," as Donald Goellnicht puts it. The emasculation of Chinese American men, mainly through laws that prevented them from having "normal" families and jobs and through racism in general, is confronted in all of the stories.

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about her male relatives. Kingston, however, does not depict men as weak and incapable in general, but always points out the reasons for the unfortunate situations in which they find themselves (namely racist ones). She turns them into heroes of their own kind; in their own way they are "claiming America," as she puts it.\(^{138}\) She shows all the male characters in their pain and dignity and portrays them in a sympathetic way.

She only criticizes men when they turn their frustration against women. As Goellnicht writes: "...Chinese American men often seek to reassert their lost patriarchal power by denigrating a group they perceive as weaker than themselves: Chinese American women."\(^{139}\) Again, we meet the girl-hating great-uncle, and one of Maxine's versions of her father curses misogynously: "'Dog vomit. Your mother's cunt. Your mother's smelly cunt!' 'Stink pig. Mother's cunt.'" (13) He makes little Maxine hope that "those curses are only common Chinese sayings. That you did not mean to make me sicken at being female." (14) But even when showing misogynous traits in her male characters, Kingston stresses that they might be the result of the stressful situation in which the men live. Maxine's father curses, for instance, after he has trouble in his laundry and cannot call the police for help for fear of being evicted as an illegal immigrant.

Additionally, not all men in Kingston's book are misogynous; as a matter of fact such men are in the minority. In one version, Maxine's fathers is very loving to all of his children, and the already mentioned paternal grandfather in the wicker basket even wanted to swap his youngest son (Maxine's father) for a girl the same age.\(^{140}\) As both Goellnicht and King-Kok Cheung point out, "...Kingston can both deplore the emasculation of China Men by mainstream America and critique the

\(^{137}\) Goellnicht 193.

\(^{138}\) "What I am doing in this new book is claiming America,' declares Maxine Hong Kingston. "That seems to be the common strain that runs through all the characters. In story after story Chinese-American people are claiming America, which goes all the way from one character saying that a Chinese explorer found this place before Leif Ericsson did to another one buying a house here." (Pfaff 1)

\(^{139}\) Goellnicht 200.
Confucian patriarchy of traditional family life."\textsuperscript{141} She is able to criticize racism and sexism at the same time. Her main achievement in \textit{China Men} is, however, to show Chinese Americans in their place in American history, and thereby to "claim America" for them.

3. Why Kingston is Different
Kingston generally achieves what the editors of the two volumes of \textit{Aiiieeeee!} expect of Chinese/Asian American literature: she creates literature that is "distinct from Asia and white America," but also related to both at the same time – her literature is definitely Asian American. This can be seen in the way she uses language, the topics she chooses, and most of all in the way she intertwines Chinese tales and past with American history and present. Linda Chin Sledge even argues that the formal models for \textit{China Men} seem to be epics like \textit{Romance of the Three Kingdoms}, the work that Frank Chin sees as the basis of all Chinese American literature and which he sees reflected in Chu's \textit{Eat a Bowl of Tea}.\textsuperscript{142} Kingston is basically the ideal Asian American writer in the minds of the \textit{Aiiieeeee!}-editors, except for her criticism of Chinese (American) men. It is obvious that Frank Chin mainly thinks of this when he complains about Kingston changing the legend of Fa Mu Lan. Of the many changes Kingston makes, he explicitly points out that in the original tale there never is "any instance of ethical male domination or misogynistic cruelty being inflicted on Mulan."

The main difference between Kingston and both earlier activist writers and writers who are promoted by them (for example, Okada and Chu) is that Kingston does not merely engage the problems of ethnicity and racism, but also brings feminism into the discourse as well. Her work is also significant because of the new narrative forms that she creates. While Okada, Chu, and also most of the authors

\textsuperscript{140} His family, however, considers him insane.
\textsuperscript{141} Goellnicht 194.
compiled in the two volumes of *Aiiiiiiii!* all write in the realist tradition, Kingston's novels are more imaginative and experimental. The fact that Kingston is different from the activist writers and their ideals does not, however, mean that Kingston is apolitical: on the contrary, she is extremely political, but she shows her concerns in a special, more complex, and more aesthetic way. And while in the works of the writers mentioned above the protagonists are merely trying to solve questions of identity, in Kingston's work they have already found a solution and are hence one step ahead. Her heroes and heroines suffer a great deal as well, but they end up as persons who are able to come to terms with their dual heritage and actually live with a Chinese American identity. A good example is Maxine's brother. During the Vietnam war, in spite of being a pacifist, he joins the U.S. Army. He has to serve in many Asian countries and there is often asked "What are you?" His answer then in always very simple and clear: "Chinese American." (294-296) Alternatively, he could have easily claimed being "American," without any modification, especially since he is wearing an American uniform and is told that he is "Q Clearance ... not precariously American but super-American, extraordinarily secure" by his commanding officer. But he is conscious and proud of both his backgrounds. He has already found his particular American identity, an identity Chu's characters and especially Okada's no-no boy Ichiro are still looking for. His confidence in his American identity is rooted in the fact that he, like many Chinese (American) people before him, actively participates in American history, namely by fighting in one of the most important wars the United States was involved in. He is "claiming America," just as many Chinese (American) men have in the past. The brother has, as well as Maxine, found his Chinese American identity. Kingston shows that an Asian American identity can be both, male and female.

4. **Short Digression: Some of Kingston's Predecessors**

At this point, it has to be pointed out that Kingston, of course, was not the first Asian American writer to address women's issues. She receives most of the attention because she was the first Asian American writer to achieve widespread influence. In the following, I will briefly write about two Japanese American writers, Hisaye Yamamoto and Wakako Yamauchi, who can be called pre-feminist due to the way they handle women's issues in their works.\(^{143}\) They, too, criticize the negative influence patriarchy can have on women's lives. Their criticism, however, is not as explicit as Kingston's, as their protagonists never really speak up or fight for their rights but suffer quietly, and this is perhaps, next to their literary merit, why they were included in the two *Aiiieeeee!*-anthologies.

The two "grand old ladies" of Japanese American literature, Hisaye Yamamoto and Wakako Yamauchi, are both second-generation Japanese Americans, born in California in the 1920s. They met during World War II in an internment camp in Poston, Arizona and became friends.\(^{144}\) Both concentrate on writing short stories; although Yamauchi also wrote some plays. Their female protagonists are often unusual or gifted women who become insane or extremely unhappy due to the circumstances in which they have to live. Like in Kingston's works, the circumstances are marked by racism and patriarchy. Good examples of their work are Yamamoto's "Seventeen Syllables" (1949),\(^{145}\) "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara,"\(^{146}\) "Yoneko's Earthquake" (1951),\(^{147}\) and her 1990-short story

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\(^{143}\) The two Japanese American writers thematically preceeded Kingston's work as to their dealing with women's issues. For a discussion of Kingston's position in the tradition of Chinese American woman writers see, for example, Amy Ling's "Chinese American Woman Writers: The Tradition behind Maxine Hong Kingston," and *Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry* by the same author.

\(^{144}\) Chan et al., *Aiiieeeee!* 266, 283-84.


"Eukalyptus," as well as Yamauchi's "And the Soul Shall Dance" (1966). The latter as well as Yamamoto's "Seventeen Syllables" and "Yoneko's Earthquake" describe the harsh life of Japanese farmers in rural California.

In Yamauchi's "And the Soul Shall Dance," a young Japanese American girl observes Mrs. Oka, a neighbor, who had to marry her deceased sister's husband because she herself had been involved in a love affair "with a man of poor reputation" and her family was anxious to send her away. With a husband whom she does not love and who does not love her either, and in a country so different from her home, Japan, she turns to drinking, smoking, and "strange" behavior. She is often beaten by her husband and seems to be sick of life. She eventually dies of pneumonia, but a short time before her death she is seen by the narrator, picking flowers in the evening desert, singing.

The situation of Mrs. Kurada in Yamamoto's "Seventeen Syllables" is similar: she had to leave Japan and marry a stranger because she had an affair with a son of a rich family, who was not allowed to marry her, and became pregnant. Again, the story is told from the perspective of a young Japanese American girl, Rosie, Mrs. Kurada's daughter. Mrs. Kurada handles her fate better than Mrs. Oka, though. She works on her husband's tomato farm and in her rare spare-time writes haikus. Mr. Kurada considers this foolish and a waste of time, and when his wife wins the first prize in a haiku contest, he burns the trophy and orders her back to work. After that, Mrs. Kurada tries to make Rosie promise never to marry.

In Yamamoto's "Yoneko's Earthquake," the again unhappy mother, who is likewise married to a not very understanding husband, has an affair with a Filipino who helps with the farm work (but this is never explicitly said and can only be determined by reading between the lines). "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara" is about

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a beautiful ex-ballet dancer. Her insanity is based on unhappy love as well, but the main reason for her misery is life in the internment camp she is brought to.

All of the stories are told from the perspective of young Japanese American girls who only in retrospect understand the causes for the behavior of the older women whom they observe. A story published in 1990 when Hisaye Yamamoto, then Yamamoto De Soto, was nearly seventy years old still has the same tenor. The perspective here is no longer that of a young girl, but of an older Japanese American woman with a Spanish family name who has spent some time in an insane asylum and is now cured. Yet she returns there once in a while to help other women who are still there. At the end of the story she asks why so many women from all kinds of ethnic and social backgrounds are in need of psychiatric help. Like in her earlier short stories, she does not exclusively blame male society for it, but she is very suggestive about it:

Unwanted sons, intransigent married lovers, husbands and sons who treat us like dirt, fathers who wanted a son instead - this aggregate of female woe, are we all here because of what men do or don't? No, it is not that simple. Probably there are men in like places whose vulnerabilities stem from dealings with mothers, wives, women friends? Where do the roots of our malaise lie buried?\textsuperscript{150}

Maxine Hong Kingston's writings are closer to those of Yamauchi, Yamamoto, and even Louis Chu than to the works of the \textit{Aiiiiieeee!}-editors. The works of the latter are closer to her generation and time, but the way Kingston treats women issues and individualism and the way she incorporates Chinese tales into her narrative bears more similarities to the two Japanese American women and to Louis Chu. Maybe it can be said that Kingston freed Asian American literature of the seriousness and strict political dogma of the 1960s and 1970s by returning to a more playful, fictional, artistic, and even experimental way of writing. She thus saved Asian American literature from the political and artistic dead end caused by the ideological program

\textsuperscript{150} Yamamoto De Soto 111.
of the *Aiiieeee*-editors. Through her writing and her public presence as the probably best-known Asian American writer, she opened the door for many others and paved the way for them to show their personal, thematic, and stylistic "otherness." She essentially proved that there is more than one way to write Asian American literature and more than one way to be Asian American.

Some of the authors who profited not only from Kingston's liberation of Asian American literature, but also from the work that was done by earlier writers and the *Aiiieeee*-editors will be discussed in the following chapter.
IV. Contemporary Chinese and Japanese American Literature – A Few Examples

The number of Japanese and Chinese literary works being published have increased in the last decades, and in them, questions of identity and belonging are dealt with in a multitude of ways. In the following, I will briefly touch upon a few recent examples of Japanese and Chinese American writing to give an overview about more recent works.

Whereas in the chapters on the "Asian American classics" I tried to show the processes of identity formation, i.e. how the protagonists try to find a viable Asian American identity, in the discussion of the following works, I will concentrate on specific details that influence the way one thinks about identity.

A. On Names: "Chang"

Names are important in Asian cultures – they are chosen carefully since they are thought to influence the lives and characters of their bearers. Therefore, it is highly interesting to see how this issue, which is closely related to the concept of identity since a name is part of identity, is confronted in an American context. Probably more than half of all Asian American literary works have at least one passage dealing with the names of the main characters, how they got them, and what they mean in general and in their American lives in particular. One short story that deals with names, among other things, is "Chang" (1989) by Sigrid Nunez. Since this story seems to exhibit autobiographical traits (Sigrid Nunez has, like the first-person narrator in her

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story, a Panamanian Shanghainese father and a German mother, a German first name and a Spanish last name), I will call the main character "Sigrid."

Sigrid's parents meet after WWII, when the father is stationed with the U.S. Army in the small southern German town in which her mother lives. The two move to New York, marry, and bear three children, but the parents do not get along with each other. The father is always working, and the mother, whose English is soon much better than the father's, is constantly complaining about everything. Communication and understanding of any kind between the two seem impossible; if they see each other, they fight. The mother wants to raise her children as Germans, and so they grow up wearing dirndls and braided hair in a house full of cuckoo clocks and pictures of alpine landscapes. She gives each of her daughters "a Teutonic name, impossible for him [the father] to pronounce." (378) The father looks and probably feels like an alien in the house and comes home only to eat and sleep between his work shifts. Feeling like an outsider in his own family, he hardly talks to his children, and as a result, they do not know anything about him. When he suddenly dies of lung cancer, the whole family is taken by surprise, for he had never mentioned or shown any pain. After his death, Sigrid wants to find out more about her father about whom she knows incredibly little. It is at this point that the fictional Sigrid and the writer Sigrid Nunez overlap: "Chang" is the effort to reconstruct a father's life and history. In this, Sigrid has to rely on the statements of other people and her own speculations. For example, she does not know why suddenly in the middle of his life his last name changed from Chang, which was his father's name, to the Spanish name of his Panamanian mother, which not only caused a lot of confusion in his life but also leaves his daughters, who are called names for their Asian looks, not only with a German first name but also with a Spanish last name ("I wanted to be an all-American girl with a name like Sue Brown," is how Sigrid remembers the

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152 This is done to simplify the discussion of the short story rather than to imply that the Sigrid in the short story really is Sigrid Nunez.
Nunez shows this process of reconstruction quite vividly: like in a documentary film, Sigrid gathers the few facts known about her father, mixes them with different scenes from the past, with little bits and pieces from her memory, and adds interview-like statements from people who knew her father. The image that arises in this collage of facts and memories is that of a quite remarkable man who is very different from the father the family knew when he was still alive. While still alive, he seemed like a stereotypical Asian: hard-working, inscrutable, bad English-speaker, unpopular. In Sigrid's portrait, her father seems like a much more interesting, less stereotypical, and much more human person. We get fragmentary glimpses of his childhood and youth in Panama and China, of his time in the army in Germany, and of the various jobs he did to provide for his family. We learn that he disliked cats but liked blond hair, and above all, was a lover of Hank Williams songs. Yet the facts and impressions Sigrid collects about her father are, of course, limited. A much more accurate image of him would have been possible if he had spoken for himself, and many questions about him remain unanswered. Similar to the female narrator in China Men, Sigrid tells the story of a man who does not want or maybe is not able to tell it himself. Telling his story helps Sigrid not only to find out more about her father but also about herself; she manages to understand at least a little better about her Panamanian Shanghainese background. Getting to know more about this background helps Sigrid to embrace her different cultural and ethnic roots and thus accept and maybe even be proud of her German first name, her Spanish last name, and her Asian looks. "Chang" is a story that shows at least a dual construction of identity: one is the construction of Chang's identity through various opinions and perceptions of him gathered by Sigrid. His identity is defined from the outside, and the definition based on various images that people have of him. The other identity that is shaped is Sigrid's.

A new aspect that is raised in "Chang" and that plays a more and more
important role in contemporary ethnic writing is the coming to terms with a multicultural and multiethnic identity. Edith Eaton, who was briefly mentioned in the beginning of this work, was an early representative of this group that naturally becomes more prominent now. More examples for mixed-race identity will be seen later on.\(^{153}\)

**B. "Moon" - An Asian American Revenge Tale**

Marilyn Chin's "Moon"\(^{154}\) (1993) is what Chin herself calls a "Chinese American revenge tale." The story is set in 1991 and reads like a modern fairy tale or rather a cartoon. The initial situation is as follows:

Moon was a little fat Chinese girl. She had a big, yellow face befitting her name. She was sad and lonely as were all little fat Chinese girls in 1991, and she had a strange, insatiable desire for a pair of trashy blonde twins named Smith (no accounting for taste, of course). Every night she would wander on the beach in search of them, hoping to espy them taking a joyride around Pacific Beach in their rebuilt sky-blue Impala: their long blond hair swept backward like horses' manes, their faces obscenely sunburned, resembling ripe halves of peaches. (87)

One evening she spots the two boys at the beach and walks towards them, singing a Chinese song. The boys are so dumb that they had to repeat fifth grade twice and of


course have no appreciation for her song, but "[f]inally, the boys offered to give fat Moon a ride in their stainless steel canoe they got for Christmas (we know, of course, that they were up to trouble; you don't think that their hospitality was sincere, do you?)." Moon happily accepts the offer and the three take off, Moon so happy "that she started strumming her lute and singing the song of Hiawatha (don't ask me why, this was what she felt like singing)." (88) The boys make Moon fall into the water and only rescue her to abuse her even more: "Thus, the boys ripped off Moon's dress and took turns pissing all over her round face and belly saying, 'So, it's true, it's true that your cunts are really slanted. Slant-eyed cunt! Did you really think that we had any interest in you?"' (89) Naked and wailing, Moon rides home on her bicycle, where her not very understanding parents await her. Instead of comforting her, they tell that she should make more out of her youth and prosperity than wailing because some white boys rejected her. "Have you no shame? Your cousin the sun matriculated in Harvard, your brothers the stars all became engineers...." (89) Then, up in her room, Moon "swears on a stack of Bibles that she would seek revenge for this terrible incident – and that if she were to die today she would come back to earth as an angry ghost to haunt those motherfuckers." She swallows a whole bottle of sleeping pills but coughs them back up a little later. Even though she does not die to take revenge, the consequences of her act are amazing:

those ten minutes of retching must have prevented oxygen from entering her brain and left her deranged for at least a month after this episode (hey, I'm no doctor, just a story-teller, take my diagnosis with caution, please). Overnight, she became a homicidal maniac. A foul plague would shroud all of southern California, which, curiously, infected only blonde men (both natural and peroxided types, those slightly hennaed would be spared). For thirty days and thirty nights Moon scoured the seaside, howling, windswept - in search of blonde victims. They would drown on their surfboards, or collapse while polishing their cars....They would suffocate in their sleep next to their wives and lovers. (89)

On the thirty-first night, Moon finally finds the Smith twins cruising in their Impala.
She rushes at them, "and her light was so powerful and bright that the boys were momentarily blinded and swerved into a canyon. Their car turned over twelve times. They were decapitated..." From that moment on, the horror ends. Moon grows up, loses weight, and becomes a famous singer.

Even though the story is highly exaggerated as is often the case with fairy tales, it has its realistic aspects. The discrimination and abuse described, the loneliness and the non-understanding parents are certainly realistic. The question of how to react to it is answered by Chin quite clearly, although the answer most likely is not meant to be taken literally, even though most everybody at one point in his or her life might have had similar fantasies. Chin calls for action instead of passivity. Like Kingston's legend of the woman warrior, Chin's tale is meant to cheer up and encourage the listener or reader. Like Mu Lan, Moon defeats her enemies with what seem to be supernatural powers. In real life, however, decapitation of the enemy, as performed in both stories, is not the actual objective; for Maxine, Mu Lan's swords turn into words, and the reader surely can imagine less violent actions as replacement for Moon's aggressions as well. According to Chin, her intention is also to give a warning:

What is the moral of the story? Well, it's a tale of revenge, obviously, written from a Chinese American girl's perspective. My intentions are to veer you away from teasing and humiliating little chubby Chinese girls like myself. And that one wanton act of humiliation you perpetuated on the fore or aft of that boat of my arrival - may be one humiliating act too many. For although we are friendly neighbors, you don't really know me. You don't know the depth of my humiliation. You don't know what's beneath my doing. (90)

Moon, of course, is the embodiment of one of the female Asian (American) stereotypes: she is an outsider, small, fat, and unattractive, does not have any friends but lusts for blond boys and comes from a family of engineers and Ivy League students. Her reaction to her abuse, however, is not stereotypical – it would have been, though, if she had simply taken her life. In a playful way, Chin revises the
stereotype of the passive and enduring Asian who lets anything happen to him or her. Like a phoenix, Moon's new identity rises from the ashes of her old image, never to be the same again.

C. The Asian American Male - *Pangs of Love*

*Pangs of Love* (1991) is a collection of short stories by David Wong Louie. In it, Louie plays with different images of Asian American men. What is remarkable in his work is that he does not simply try to abandon negative and stereotypical images of Asian American men by presenting exclusively positive ones, but instead consciously uses stereotypes to let the reader figure out how silly they are. Similar to photographer Cindy Sherman in her earlier works (especially in the "Untitled Film Stills") or to artist Carrie Mae Weems in some of her photographs, he presents contemporary stereotypes of Asian American men to his readers and leaves it up to them to deconstruct them. His characters are, however, not bluntly stereotypical, but have, at least most of the time, only very subtle stereotypical traits. Consequently, the readers not only have to find out what exactly is stereotypical and why it appears to them as such, but they also constantly have to question their own concept of stereotypes: they are never really sure which stereotypical trait only exists in their imagination and which is of a more universal nature, or what is part of a character's personality and what is mere generalization.

Louie's protagonists are, among others, owners of an Italian-style café, a recent immigrant from China, a computer expert who murders his wife and keeps her body in a bathtub full of ice, a would-be sushi chef, and a designer of synthetic flavors and fragrances. Most of his men are Asian American Woody Allens: comic, small, clumsy, and not very lucky. They are all of Asian descent, but ethnicity is never

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made the main issue – they are described as simply being part of their surroundings. The men are rather defined by their personalities, sexual preferences, temperaments, jobs, and relationships. In Louie's stories, not only one but several different types of Asian American masculinity can be found. Their constructedness is always obvious because they seem either stereotypical, or extreme, or just comic. Wong thus plays with stereotypes and their perception. The readers have to distinguish between what is "real" and what is just generally perceived to be real, with the result that they have to reflect on (stereo)typical traits hidden both in the characters and in society.

D. New Realism: Fae Myenne Ng's Bone

Fae Myenne Ng's novel Bone (1993) is another book about being a second generation Chinese American, about being female, and about living in Chinatown. Bone differs greatly, however, from the other books with similar subjects described so far in being probably the most realistic, direct, and brutal in its descriptions. It has nothing romantic or exotic about it. There are no comic effects like in Eat a Bowl of Tea. Different from Maxine in Kingston's Woman Warrior, Ng's protagonist Leila Leong does not have any mythical heroes to dream about but always has to face harsh reality. Leila lives and works in contemporary San Francisco Chinatown. She works at a school there; her job involves "being the bridge between the classroom teacher and the parents. Teachers target the kids, and I make home visits; sometimes a student needs special tutoring, sometimes it's a disciplinary problem I have to discuss with the parents." She likes her job, but sometimes it depresses her because the lives of the families she visits are so difficult and they remind her so much of her family when she grew up.


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another. They have enough worries, and they don't like me coming in and telling them they have one more. ... Being inside their cramped apartments depresses me. I'm reminded that we've lived like that, too. The sewing machine next to the television, the rice bowls stacked on the table, the rolled-up blankets pushed to one side of the sofa. Cardboard boxes everywhere, rearranged and used as stools or tables or homework desks. The money talk at dinner-time, the list of things they don't know or can't figure out. Cluttered rooms. Bare lives. Every day I'm reminded nothing's changed about making a life or raising kids. Everything is hard. (16-17)

Leila also helps her students' parents with other things when she visits them, such as making official phone calls or translating letters, even though this is not a part of her job. This makes her remember her youth as well, when she disliked doing these things for her own parents: "Growing up, I wasn't as generous. I hated standing in the lines: social security, disability, immigration. What I hated most was the talking for Mah and Leon [her mother and step-father], the whole translation number." (17)

Leila and her two sisters had a difficult childhood due to the fact that their parents were immigrants and very poor. Mah always worked very hard as a seamstress: during the day she worked in a sweatshop and at night at home. Leon was away working as a seaman most of the time. When he could not work at sea anymore, he did whatever job was available, and sometimes two or three jobs at the same time. Even though both of them worked very hard, there was never enough money, and the parents turned bitter and were constantly fighting. Eventually, Leon moved out. A great deal of responsibility was placed on the children, especially on Leila, the oldest. Not a single one of the three daughters remains unscarred by the circumstances under which they grew up and by the people their parents turned into, and each of them has a different way of dealing with it. Nina, the youngest, described as the one who "reacts," moves away as far as she can, to New York. There she works as a flight attendant and later as a guide for tours to China. Ona, the "middle girl," is always the quiet one. She kills herself by jumping from a building. The reason for her suicide is not clear; maybe she did it because her parents did not allow
her to continue to meet her Romeo-like boyfriend. Leila describes herself as the one who can "endure." Even though she finds it difficult, she still tries to help her parents and takes care of them, and even takes care of other Chinese. She stays in Chinatown because of her parents, even though she would like to live with her boyfriend Mason in the Mission district, outside of Chinatown. Only when she marries Mason does she decide to move. It is at this point that the book starts, then moving backward in time to the moment after Ona's death. Childhood memories in-between help explain the situation.

As to the question of identity, Leila at no point in the novel finds herself having an identity conflict. Her problems are rather of an emotional nature: her family stands at the center of her worries. Like many adult second generation Asian Americans, Leila feels guilty and concerned about her parents for their hard immigrant lives. It is difficult for her not to feel too involved in her parents' lives, to let go and stop worrying and caring all the time. She knows that she needs to lead a more independent and selfish life, but finds this hard to do. She knows that she cannot compensate for her parents' past and present hardships, but she nevertheless feels obliged to them because she loves them. At the end of the book she solves this problem and finds a compromise between leading her own life and caring for her parents. She considers leaving Salmon Alley, her Chinatown home, and now this prospect does not frighten her anymore, since she is confident that she will always remember everything: "I was reassured. I knew what I held in my heart would guide me. So I wasn't worried when I turned that corner, leaving the old blue sign, Salmon Alley, Mah and Leon - everything – backdaire [sic]." (194)

Leila's conflict is not primarily based on ethnicity. It is more a problem that many people face when they cut the cord from someone they love. In Leila's case, the situation has become more difficult due to the situation of their family and their immigrant life, the harsh fates of her parents.

While identity is not an issue in Bone, the questions of home and belonging do
play a role. Leila does have a home, but it is a difficult one, that does not provide security and warmth. Her family is not intact anymore, since her parents live separated from each other, one of her sisters is dead and the other far away. Leila feels strongly connected to her family and also to Chinatown, where she has spent all her life, but she knows she has to leave both in order to be happy. The solution she finds is to physically leave her family and surroundings, but to keep them in her heart and memories.

E. Asian American Hoop Dreams: The Necessary Hunger

Nina Revoyr's *The Necessary Hunger* (1997) is light Asian American reading for younger readers. It is about the senior year of two gifted high school basketball players, a Japanese American, Nancy Takahiro, and an African American, Raina Webber. Nancy and Raina play for rival teams but soon find themselves living under the same roof since their single parents, Raina's mother and Nancy's father, have fallen in love and moved in together. The book is about basketball, growing up in a "bad" Los Angeles neighborhood in the 1980s, and having to face "real life" after high school, friendship, and love. All the characters are very casual about their racial and sexual identity (many of the female basketball players in the book, along with Raina and Nancy, are gay). Problems concerning race and sexual orientation are only raised from the outside. For Nancy and her predominately black teammates and fans there is no question as to whether a Japanese American belongs in a black team, but she sometimes hears racist remarks from other teams concerning her ethnicity. All sexual preferences are tolerated among the teammates but not by their parents, and while their interracial relationship feels quite normal to Nancy and Raina's parents, a friend of Raina's mother has strong objections against it. Ethnicity does not play a very dominant role, and is only mentioned occasionally. Nancy, for example, is
well-aware of the fact that her situation would be very different if she were not such a good basketball player, because then she would probably not be able to gain the respect she commands among the black community, and most importantly, she would not get as many scholarship offers from so many colleges. She knows that she and also Raina are privileged, while many of their teammates will never get out of Inglewood and will be stuck with their poverty, the crimes, the drugs, and the unemployment there. At the end of the novel, Nancy and Raina leave Inglewood to attend different colleges, knowing that their lives will never be as easy and careless as they were during their high school years.

If asked "what" or "who" she is, Nancy certainly would not mention "Asian American" in the first place, but rather that she is a passionate basketball player, gay, and in love with Raina, and that she is about to enter college and start a new life, leaving her old friends and her father behind. Her home, her father (a teacher and football coach at another high school and a second-generation Japanese American), and her relationship to him could not be more "American." Underneath all this, she is still Japanese American, though, and fully aware of it. She knows about the internment of her grandparents and father when he was a child, about racism and prejudices, but she does not want to be anybody or anything else than she is. Ethnicity is important, but it is not the predominant issue for her. This Japanese American character, female, gay, successful, loving and loved, very confident and rooted in her community is, of course, light-years away from John Okada's no-no boy Ichiro.

Asian American literature is still fighting stereotyping and racism, and it is still about finding a place and identity for oneself and one's generation, but the means have changed considerably and have become more individual, playful, and artistic. Asian American literature today shows that there are many different ways of being

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Asian American.\textsuperscript{158}

V. Korean America

Chinese and Japanese were the first Asians to settle in the United States, but today they are no longer among the sole Asian groups immigrating to the country. Nowadays, the number of Japanese leaving Japan to live elsewhere is negligible. China, India, Korea, the Philippines, and Vietnam are the five largest contributors of Asian-born immigrants to the United States, and the number of people coming from these nations is still growing.\textsuperscript{159} From these five countries, I have chosen to examine Korean-born artists and writers in more detail, even though it would be as exciting to investigate closely the literatures and art of the other groups mentioned.

The preference for Korean American literature and art was, as already mentioned in the introduction, initially triggered by personal interest, but it turned out that they are especially engaging and rewarding subjects. Korean American culture has benefited from the early activities in Asian America, but it also has a distinct character, and little research has been done on it so far.

Koreans, compared to other Asian groups, immigrated relatively late to the United States. Korean immigration to the United States had already begun at the end of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, but it was only after 1965 that significant numbers of Koreans started coming to the country. Consequently, there have been comparatively few Korean American works until recently. With larger numbers of members of the second and 1.5 generation\textsuperscript{160} reaching a productive age, the 1990s saw a considerable, continuing growth in Korean American cultural expression that as such became an

\textsuperscript{158} Of course, there have also been some earlier Asian American writers who, similar to the younger writers mentioned here, put individualistic issues above ethnicity, for whom their characters were first of all individuals and then, secondly, members of an ethnic minority. Among these exceptions were, for example, Diana Chang and the short story writer Toshio Mori.

\textsuperscript{159} U.S. Census Bureau, \textit{Census Brief 2000—From the Mideast to the Pacific: A Profile of the Nation's Asian Foreign-Born Population}, September 2000. (CENBR/00-4)

\textsuperscript{160} "1.5 generation" refers to Koreans who were born in Korea but immigrated to the U.S. at an early age,
important part of U.S.-American cultural life. When, in the beginning of the 1980s, Elaine Kim wrote her landmark *Asian American Literature*, the first comprehensive study of Asian American writing, she almost apologized for including – out of personal interest - Korean American works in her survey: "Some readers may fault me for including Korean American literature, which is hardly more plentiful than Vietnamese American writing at the moment, since the Korean American population is largely a new one too."\(^{161}\) It was prescient of her to talk of a momentary situation, since today, almost two decades later, the situation has indeed changed dramatically.

Today, a closer examination of Korean American works is not only easily justified, but even compelling. An obvious indicator for the strong presence of Korean American literature is the fact that more and more works are included in anthologies. In the two volumes of *Aiîiieeeel*, Korean American works were not yet included, but in all Asian American anthologies since then, Korean American writers were present. 2001 saw the release of *Kŏri*, the first collection of writings exclusively by Americans of Korean ancestry published by a major publishing house.\(^{162}\)

Not much has been written about Korean American cultural production yet: many texts treat Korean Americans from a historical, sociological or psychological point of view, but relatively few study literature or art and hardly any both literature and art. As to the subject of identity and belonging, almost nothing has been written. A dissertation by John Kyhan Lee explores the question of identity in Korean American literature, but it has been a while since it was written and published. The author deals with only three writers, Younghill Kang, Richard E. Kim und Cathy

\(^{161}\) Kim xv

Two Korean American anthologies that were published before *Kŏri* by smaller publishers are Maria Hong and David D. Kim, eds., "Voices Stirring. An Anthology of Korean American Writing," *The APA Journal* 1.2 (1992) and Hyun Yi Kang, ed., *writing away here: a korean/american anthology* (Oakland: Korean American Arts Festival Committee, 1994).
Song.\textsuperscript{163} For reasons that will be specified below, these three will not be dealt with extensively.

Korean American literature has much in common with other Asian American writing, but there is also something specific about it. In the following sections, I will examine the similarities of Korean American works to some of the Asian American classics and, at the same time, will show what distinguishes them, especially regarding the subjects of identity and belonging. I will start with an overview of early Korean American writing and then discuss in more detail some recent works. When necessary, historical information again will be added.\textsuperscript{164} Several works of art will be included in the discussion since it is interesting how similar subjects appear in the different arts.

A. Early Korean American Literature

Among the classics in Korean American literature are certainly Younghill Kang's books, especially \textit{East Goes West} (1937), as well as Kim Ronyoung's \textit{Clay Walls} (1987) and Mary Paik Lee's \textit{Quiet Odyssey} (1990).\textsuperscript{165} New Il-Han's \textit{When I Was a Boy in Korea}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[164] General information on Korean American history can be found in the works of Ronald Takaki, Sucheng Chan, and Bruce Cumings. More detailed information appears in the following works: Herbert R. Barringer and Sung-Nam Cho, \textit{Koreans in the United States. A Fact Book} (Honolulu: Center for Korean Studies, U of Hawaii, 1989).
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
(1928) fell into oblivion, whereas Easurk Emsen Charr's autobiography *The Golden Mountain* (1961) and the works of Richard Kim, a writer who was quite successful in the 1960s, have been rediscovered.¹⁶⁶

I will not discuss New Il-Han's *When I Was a Boy in Korea* because it is, strictly speaking, not a novel nor a piece of fiction. Han belongs to the kind of writers Elaine Kim calls "ambassadors of goodwill." She points out that his book is an almost anthropological report about Korean traditions and customs, asking for sympathy and understanding of the Korean culture.¹⁶⁷ I will also not write about Richard Kim, even though his novels are very interesting. The reason is for this omission is simple: his novels are all set in Korea and have all-Korean characters. This means that the American aspect that is crucial for this work is missing completely. Kim, who is strongly influenced by French existentialism, mainly depicts situations of extreme human dilemma.¹⁶⁸

*Quiet Odyssey* by Mary Paik Lee and *The Golden Mountain* by Easurk Emsen Charr are autobiographies. This genre deserves a survey of its own because autobiographical works are important for the representation of early Korean American life in the United States and warrant being looked at differently than fiction. As a mere 10-year-old, Charr came alone to the United States in 1905 via Hawaii. He visited American schools and colleges and, even though not a national yet, fought for the Americans in WW I. His autobiography starts with his childhood in Korea, of which he has an amazingly clear memory. The book's editor, historian Wayne Patterson, remarks that readers not only learn about "the life of a Korean immigrant in early

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¹⁶⁶ New Il-Han, *When I Was a Boy in Korea* (Boston: Lothrop, 1928).
¹⁶⁷ Kim, *Asian American Literature* 25.
¹⁶⁸ A comparative work of the influence of the French existentialists (especially of Albert Camus) on the
twentieth-century America but also much about late Yi Dynasty Korea at the turn of the century." (xiii) The descriptions of his life in the United States are often enthusiastic and without criticism concerning possible discrimination. While there might be other plausible reasons for his silence about it, Charr did experience discrimination and racism but chose not to talk about it. The following quote from Charr's book represents the tone and content of his autobiography and his attitude towards his new home: "Indeed, this is the New Promised Land that I found flowing with milk of wisdom and honey of freedom. I am exceedingly glad that I came to America, and I am humbly proud that I am an American citizen. May God bless America, my country, my home!" (xxxix)

Mary Paik Lee's *Quiet Odyssey: A Pioneer Korean Woman in America* is also edited by a historian, Sucheng Chan. Lee, too, belongs to the earlier generation of Korean immigrants coming to the United States via Hawaii. In 1910, at the age of 10, Lee immigrated to Hawaii with her family. A bit later, they arrived in California. Similar to Charr, Lee was a devout Christian, but in contrast to him she did portray the negative aspects of her American life. In her autobiography she explains, for example, why she remembers everything so clearly: "But these things I've written down ... I remember them because they made me suffer so" (xiii, emphasis added by Sucheng Chan). Chan stresses how rare autobiographies written in English by female members of this early immigrant generation are. This renders Lee an exception, but also a representative of many Asian women who were unable to write down their thoughts, feelings, and experiences:

Altogether, no more than three dozen Korean-born children resided along the Pacific Coast during the first decade of this century. Mary Paik Lee, born Paik Kuang Sun, was one of the girls; she is the only one who has written her life story. ... Her narrative is at once singular and representative: though there were few Korean girls and women in the United States – a fact that makes her account unique – there were thousands of immigrant females from other

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169 See, for example, Wayne Patterson's discussion of the issue in the foreword of the book.
Asian countries who lived in circumstances similar to hers, whose stories, because they were unrecorded, have been lost to history. (xv-xvi)

Lee's autobiography is a touching account of an incredibly hard life full of work and suffering, but also full of strength and believe. It is completely different from Charr's book. While Charr is full of praise and flowery words for his new home, Lee is able to critically observe things that happened to her in the United States.

The first Korean American to write novels, although with an autobiographical touch, was Younghill Kang. He is considered to be the "father of Korean American literature." He wrote two interconnected novels, *The Grass Roof* (1931) and *East Goes West* (1937). While the former describes the life of the personal narrator, Chungpa Han, in Korea, the latter portrays his experiences in his new home, the United States, and is therefore of importance to this study. I will briefly deal with him and then turn to "his children," contemporary Korean American writers.

Elaine Kim points out that Kang saw himself not as a guest or visitor to the United States but sincerely tried to find a place for himself in the country and to make, at a very early point in his life, the transition from Korean to Korean American. She writes about Kang: "Kang was a unique figure for his time, the only Korean immigrant to have written book-length fiction in English, and autobiographical fiction at that. In this and in many other ways he was completely unrepresentative of his people, yet became something of a spokesman for Koreans in America almost by default." Kang was also not quite representative due to the fact that he belonged to the Korean upper-class and thus was educated and well-read in the Chinese classics, as well as in Western literature. That he felt himself to be different from "ordinary" immigrants can be seen in the attitude of his protagonist Chungpa Han towards other Korean immigrants, such as students or people driven to the United States for economic reasons. He thinks that most of them are stuck in the past,

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171 Kim 33.
nostalgic for their homeland and unwilling to accept their new circumstances. In his eyes, Korea, and the East in general, represents an old and dying culture; whereas the West stands for the future, the new and the young. Chungpa therefore adores the West and is critical of his home country and its culture. He soon realizes, however, that there is a discrepancy between the West he knows from literature and the West he experiences. While he had poetic ideas of the life in the West, meaning the United States in particular, and its people, he soon becomes more realistic after having faced discrimination, poverty, and work as servant, waiter, sales representative, and department store clerk. However, Han's American life is not only colored by negative experiences. He also meets nice and understanding Americans who are tolerant and helpful. In the end, Han remains an outsider. He is not granted access to American society, does not become part of the United States. His unhappy love for Trip, an American girl, can be seen as a paradigm for this: Trip is superficially interested in him and his "exoticness," but does not really care for him as a person and thus politely shakes him off. Chungpa misinterprets her initial interest as being genuine and only realizes that he was wrong when he finds himself in front of her door, which remains forever closed to him because she has moved and not bothered to leave an address for him. It seems as if Chungpa unsuccessfully searches for love and a home, and as if he is trying to become Korean American, but is not accepted as such. It will be interesting to see how the generations after him perceive this situation.

B. Two Korean American Short Stories

1. "Faith"

John J. Song's "Faith" (1993) deals with a wide range of topics such as generational conflict, interracial relationships, religion and faith, as well as incest, a subject not often discussed in Asian American literature. Song belongs to the 1.5 generation of

172 John J. Song, "Faith," Charlie Chan is Dead: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction, ed. Jessica
Korean Americans; he was born in South Korea but was raised in southern California and educated at the University of California, Berkeley. Born in 1968, he is a member of the younger generation of Asian American writers.

In the story, Song's Korean American hero Keith (Ki Young) Lee lays in bed one night, reflecting on his relationship to his parents and his dead twin sister Ji Min. That evening, his mother had told him over the phone that his father had died. This message triggered reflections on certain memories. We learn that Keith's mother is an overly religious woman who believes that all difficulties and hardships that have to be endured in life are tests by God, that "one must barter for things, constantly surrender one thing for the other." (442) She sees the suicide of her daughter Ji Min, Keith's twin, as a test as well, without ever asking for the reasons for it. Her piety and blindness to reality make it difficult for Keith to respect her. The fact that she continues living with his father, whom Keith suspects of having abused Ji Min ever since she was eleven or twelve years old, makes it impossible for Keith to stay nearby. He moves, together with his Chicana girlfriend Claudia, to another city. His parents do not approve of their relationship. Mr. Lee considers it "worse than betrayal, more than just a choice or an act of independence - it was willful destruction, an annihilation of familial history." (444) Maybe subconsciously it is, for Keith's family has no value for him anymore. He wonders if now, after his father's death, his relationship to his mother will improve, but he doubts it, for "the Holy Spirit has yet to make a believer out of him. God is less reliable than memory." (449) Keith cannot forget what happened and therefore can share neither his mother's belief in heaven nor her belief that "when the family has all passed, they will meet again in a white room where there will be chairs with their names on them - his, Ji Min's, father's, and hers." (443) Even though Keith was brought up religiously, nothing is left of his faith because of what happened to his sister. Keith has left his faith, his family, and all things Korean behind and started a "new" life in a different city with a non-Korean

girlfriend and social environment. Abandoning his Korean first name, he now only uses his English name, which is certainly an important choice concerning his identity and feeling of belonging.

In "Faith," the protagonist's identity conflict is complicated and layered. Keith is Korean American, but he has turned away from his Korean background and family because of his sister's sexual abuse; in this case, his identity conflict is not caused by his ethnic background but by his family. But since he, naturally, closely associates his ethnicity with his family, he gets into a conflict with his ethnic identity as well. His father's death opens up the possibility to rethink his position and to start dealing with his mother and his Korean background again.

2. "Black Korea"
The main topics in Walter Lew's "Black Korea" (1991) are interracial relationships between African and Korean Americans and the question of integration. I will discuss these topics again later, since after the Los Angeles riots in 1992, they have become important issues in Asian American discourse.

Walter Lew himself is Korean American. He was born and raised in the United States and is not only a writer but also a documentary producer, translator of Korean literature, and multimedia artist.

The story is titled "Black Korea" after rap artist Ice Cube's song of the same title. Ice Cube wrote the song after 15-year-old Latasha Harlins, a black girl, was shot by the Korean American shopkeeper Soon Ja Du following a short fight over a stolen bottle of orange juice. The lyrics are racist and threatening and in a way anticipate what then happened in 1992:

Every time I wanna go get a fuckin brew
I gotta go down to the store with the two

174 The song appeared on Ice Cube's 1991 album Death Certificate and caused a big controversy.
Lew's short story is about the threat that results from racism in general and in this case from racism by Blacks against Koreans in particular. His plot is the following: "Last summer, four black cops arrested me because I was 'dat chinese man.' You want proof? Get me the money I need for a lawyer - I'll pay you back extra after I win." (230) The roles in the story are exchanged: instead of ignorant, brutal, corrupt, and dangerously stupid white policemen who are harassing an innocent black man, we now have black policemen harassing an innocent Korean American. For them, an Asian man is an Asian man, and it does not matter that the Chinese man they are looking for has not been in the country long enough to be released on bail, while the Korean American they have arrested has his "documents, sister, and a Business Week reporter saying I was born & raised in Baltimore." He is arrested and put in a prison cell for a night, completely at their mercy: "Don't they have to read me Miranda rights or something? What are one's rights when there's no witness but four empowered gook-grillers?" (231) As a matter of fact, the main character is not physically harmed by the policemen, but the injustice of his arrest makes him angry and bitter. For him, the civil rights movement seems to have resulted in nothing. Members of one ethnic group are still discriminating against members of another
ethnic group. He makes a persiflage of Martin Luther King's famous speech: "They have a dream! They have a dreexam! That from a gook corpse on the proud flank of Capitol Hill, even morons can one day feast in the glad tidings of proMOTION...." (232) The story ends or rather does not end with the sentence "Still have not made up our mind." (235) Literally, this relates to a Korean word carved on the prison cell wall and found there by the main character. The word is unfinished, with one letter missing, so that its meaning cannot be deciphered. Even though the main character thinks a great deal about the missing letter and the various meanings it could give to the word while he is in the prison cell and even after he is released, and although he asks other Korean Americans if they know what it might mean, he, as well as the others, cannot decide on a character and consequently on a meaning; they cannot make up their minds. He thinks that the person who made the carving did not know what the word was supposed to mean either, that the word is like a riddle which needs to be solved. This then leads to a more general problem: "Still have not made up our mind" also refers to many Korean Americans and their wishes and expectations of the United States.

The main character mentions a photo that can be found in a book by the late Korean American writer and artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. The photo also shows some wall carvings in Korean. Those carvings were made by Korean children who were forced to work in Japanese mines. They were prisoners as well, but, in contrast to the unknown prisoner who did the carving that Lew's main character finds in his prison cell, what they wrote on the wall is readable and makes a very clear statement: "Omoni pogoship’o Pae-ga kop’ayo Kohyang-e kagoship’ta." (232) It might be that Lew uses the examples of the two different kinds of carvings to show that while the children in the Japanese mines actually had something to say, Korean Americans likely feel as if they have something to voice but remain indecisive about what exactly this might be. This, then, may be caused by the question of Korean American

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176 The photo with the carvings written in Korean characters can be found on the second page of DICTEE. They, roughly translated, mean: "I want to see my mother – I am hungry – I want to go on a journey/away."
identity and the place occupied by Korean Americans in American society. Lew's main character, similar to Okada's no-no boy Ichiro, does not feel accepted as an American because his rights are not respected. He therefore turns to this one Korean word, trying to discover its meaning and maybe an answer for his situation. He thus closely identifies with the unknown Korean (American) prisoner who wrote it. This could mean that because he does not feel accepted as "American," he seeks comfort and help in his Korean background. This also corresponds with Elaine Kim's observation that, even though (cultural) nationalism as such is problematic because it separates groups of people, it may be helpful, if used in reasonable doses, for those people whose racial background prevents them from taking their place in society but who still need a place of belonging in order not to be subjugated by those in a position of domination. Her theory is that if, for example, Asian Americans are told to "go back to where they came from" – as it still frequently happens in direct or indirect ways – this place, even though probably never physically visited, can serve as a kind of "home," somewhere from which to gain pride and strength. Like in Walter Lew's story, a stronger ethnic identity is used as a "weapon and tool" for surviving gracefully in a potentially hostile society. Lew's main character identifies and allies himself with someone of "his kind" who was in the same or a similar situation, even though this person is a stranger to him and invisible. He uses this person as a point of reference. "Still have not made up our mind" also refers to the indecisiveness that many Korean Americans, especially of the first generation, feel about whether to consider America or Korea their home, whether to consider themselves American or Korean, and how to deal with the consequences the one or the other decision holds: assimilation and acceptance, integration and protest, ignorance and nationalism. Lew's story shows that feeling at home in a country is often difficult when one does not feel accepted in that country. Reaching a cultural balance, whereby one really

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feels Asian American, or, in this case, Korean American, can be difficult even if one "was born & raised in Baltimore."

C. Contemporary Korean American Novels

1. The Act of Narration in Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman*

   Nora Okja Keller's debut novel *Comfort Woman* (1997) is one of the most successful Korean/Asian American books recently published. Keller proves to be an innovative writer who manages to set new accents in Korean American literature but who at the same time shows that she writes in the tradition of the Asian American women writers. The novel draws its strength not only from a well-built plot but also from elaborate narrative strategies. This usage of new and old elements and the interplay between content and narrative technique will be examined more closely in this chapter. Emphasis will be placed on the act of narration, of storytelling as an important narrative and thematic component, and on the influence of the act of narration on the depiction of the mother-daughter relation and the questions of identity and belonging.

   a) Historical Background

   "Comfort women" was the euphemistic expression for those women who were forced to work as sex slaves in so-called "recreation camps" for Japanese soldiers. "Recreation camps" could be found beginning in 1938 almost anywhere Japanese soldiers were stationed, even at the frontlines. Around 1940, the estimated number

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178 American and European reviews of the novel were favorable, almost without exception. The book sold well: according to Luchterhand Limes, the publisher of the German translation of *Comfort Woman* (*Die Trostfrau*), 20,000 copies of the German hard cover edition have been sold in less than a year. This number is quite high for a relatively unknown author and probably the highest ever reached by a Korean American writer in Germany.

179 The Korean term often used is "chŏngshin-dae" (sometimes also transcribed "jungshindae") which is a Japanese coined term implying voluntary military service of women. Both terms, chŏngshin-dae and "comfort woman" do not do justice to the fate the women had to endure in the camps, and "sex slave" is therefore the more appropriate term. I will, however, continue to use the expression "comfort woman" as it is used in the novel.
of comfort women in the Asian Pacific must have been over 150,000. 80% of the women were Korean, with the rest coming from Japan, China, and from South-East Asian countries. It is estimated that about 35,000 of these women are still alive today. In spite of the high numbers of Korean women involved, this part of Japanese-Korean history is not very well known and hardly ever mentioned in history books. Only during the last ten years has it gained more attention since some comfort women have broken their silence and spoken out about their experiences. 

Womens organizations in Korea, Japan, the United States, Germany and other countries represented these women, demanding financial compensation, legal consequences for those responsible, and an official apology by the Japanese government. Although a small compensation sum was paid to some victims, the Japanese government failed to admit official responsibility. Only in October 1998, prime minister Kenzo Obuchi officially apologized for the crimes of Japanese during the occupation of Korea. Although the atrocities committed by the Japanese in Korea have become better known during the past several years, this does not necessarily mean that the existence of the recreation camps and the fate of these women is common knowledge. Comfort Woman is certainly a significant contribution to this awareness. One main reason for the late disclosure of the events, aside from both the Japanese and Korean governments' interest in covering up the existence of comfort women, is likely the shame of the women involved: what happened was, and for some women still is, unspeakable. Many of the women often fear being ostracized and disrespected by society and even by their families. These women are

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182 Hyunah Yang writes: "Silence has been a condition as well as a key component of representations of the Military Comfort Women issue." (124) In her article she mentions several reasons for this silence, as well as its connection to nationalism. Hyunah Yang, "Re-membering the Korean Military Comfort Women: Nationalism, Sexuality, and Silencing," Dangerous Women. Gender and Korean Nationalism, ed. Elaine H. Kim and
affected in two ways: on the one hand by what they had to experience and on the other hand by the forced silence, the harboring of an extremely sad secret.\textsuperscript{183}

b) Talking About Trauma and Truth

In \textit{Comfort Woman} we find two protagonists/narrators, Akiko and Beccah, mother and daughter. Alternately, they talk about their pasts, relating their lives to an implicit narratee. As a teenager Akiko has spent several years in a Japanese "recreation camp" in Korea and like many of the actual comfort women, she remains silent about her past until she dies. Each time she is asked about her past by Beccah, she makes up different stories about her life in Korea and how she met Beccah's American father there. Even as a child, Beccah does not believe these accounts; sometimes she challenges them, and at other times she does not, because she wants them to be true:

> Sometimes I think I must have said, "Wait! That's not what you told me before! What's the truth?" because even then I must have recognized her story as an adaptation of \textit{The Sound of Music}. ... I grew cautious of my mother's stories, never knowing what to count on or what to discount. They sounded good – most of the stories she told me included the phrase: "It was a hard time but a happy time." (32)

However, in the chapters presenting her viewpoint, Akiko does tell the true story. She tells it all, straightforward and without shame. She tells about her childhood in rural Korea. She relates bare facts and cruel details of how she was sold to the Japanese by her sister, how she was raped again and again in the camp, how she and the other women suffered and how many of them died. She tells of her first abortion and her subsequent escape, about her time with American missionaries in Pyongyang and how their Christianity could not help cure her trauma, could not "save" her. She reports how she married one of the missionaries, Beccah's father, a man much older

than herself, for whom she did not feel anything. Akiko then describes how she and her husband came to the United States, and she tells of their life there, Beccah's birth, and her husband's death. Her narrative style is very natural. Memories flow, not necessarily linked chronologically but rather by association. She speaks in a very sober, matter-of-fact tone that is seemingly neutral and merely descriptive. Only when she speaks of her baby Beccah this mode of expression changes and becomes full of love, almost poetic. By letting Akiko relate the atrocities and the suffering in the camp in this very plain way, Keller allows the unspeakable to be told. The unemotional tone is very much reminiscent of the statements of real comfort women such as Chung Seo Woon and Hwang Kûm Ja. In their descriptions of camp life, the bare facts are so terrible that the mere presence of someone who can talk about them is deeply moving. Hence, it is essential that Akiko is a first person narrator.

Akiko, so we learn in the beginning of the book from Beccah, has recently passed away. The chapters told from Beccah's perspective depict her present life and her childhood and youth in Hawaii, where she and her mother settled after her father's death. Everything she tells appears to be part of an effort to reconstruct her dead mother's life, of which she knows very little because her mother did not tell her "true" stories. Her job is writing obituaries for the local newspaper, but when her mother dies she realizes:

I have recorded so many names and deaths that the formula is templated in my brain: Name, age, date of death, survivors, services. And yet, when it came time for me to write my own mother's obituary, as I held a copy of her death certificate in my hand, I found that I did not have the facts for even the most basic, skeletal obituary. And I found I did not know how to start imaging her life. (26)

In Asian American literature, the estrangement of two generations due to different experiences and a lack of communication, as well as, the quest of members of the

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younger generation for more information about and a better understanding of the older generation are common motifs. It is, however, unusual to let both generations speak for themselves. Most of the time everything is seen from one perspective, usually the point of view of the younger generation.\textsuperscript{185} The same is true for most of the narratives dealing with mother-daughter relations: usually the mother's voice is suppressed because the daughter is the sole narrator. This has led – to use Suzanna D. Walters' expressions – to the "dual tropes of 'surpassing the mother' and the daughter as repository."\textsuperscript{186} Having the daughter as a sole narrator often results in blaming the mother and in a subjective view of the relationship. Getting both perspectives "allows for the full and various experiences of both mothers and daughters to emerge in ways that implicitly argue against any simple construction of blame."\textsuperscript{187} This is true for the narrative structure in \textit{Comfort Woman}. The depiction of the relation between mother and daughter differs immensely depending on whether Akiko or Beccah is narrating. The latter describes her mother as helpless and unable to act as a mother. She feels that neither as a child nor as a teenager was she well taken care of by Akiko. In her eyes, her mother was most of the time not even able to perform the simplest and most essential tasks a mother is traditionally expected to fulfill: to feed and protect her child. She points out that there were days when her mother "seemed normal," but even then she was not "normal like the moms on TV – the kind that baked cookies, joined the PTA, or came to weekly soccer games – but normal in that she seemed to know where she was and who I was." (2) When she was "normal" she would prepare food for Beccah, go to work, and they would get along well. Often, however, Akiko falls into trances:

\begin{quote}
When the spirits called to her, my mother would leave me and slip inside herself, to somewhere I could not and did not want to follow. It was as if the
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{185} Other novels in which both generations get to speak for themselves are, for example, Amy Tan's \textit{Joy Luck Club} and Ronyoung Kim's \textit{Clay Walls}. Famous examples for a perspective that exclusively concentrates on the daughter are Kingston's \textit{The Woman Warrior} or Ng's \textit{Bone}.


\textsuperscript{187} Walters 181.
mother I knew turned off, checked out, and someone else came to rent the space. During these times, the body of my mother would float through our one-bedroom apartment, slamming into walls and bookshelves and bumping into the corners of the coffee table and the television. (4) And I remember nights that seemed to last for days, when my mother dropped into a darkness of her own, so deep that I did not think she would ever come back to me. At Ala Wai Elementary, where I was enrolled, I was taught that if I was ever in trouble I should tell my teachers or the police; I learned about 911. But in real life, I knew none of these people would understand, that they might even hurt my mother. I was on my own. (5)

It is then up to Beccah to protect her mother, to clean the cuts and dab the bruises she gets by running into furniture and to provide both of them with food. When Beccah was still a baby, Akiko would watch her, anxious to protect her, but a role-reversal has taken place, and when Beccah grows up, she feels the need to watch over her suicidal mother:

My mother said she would watch me sleep at night when I was very young, afraid that I would suddenly stop breathing. ... Later, after my mother tried to drown herself the second time, I realized that our roles had reversed. Even at ten, I knew that I had become the guardian of her life and she the tenuous sleeper. I trained myself to wake at abrupt snorts, unusual breathing patterns. ... Each night, I went to bed praying that I would not let go in my own sleep. And in the morning, before I even opened my eyes, I'd jerk my still clenched, aching hand to my chest, yanking my mother back to me. (125)

Beccah describes her life with her mother as extremely difficult both as a child and as a teenager, and while her memories also illustrate her love for her mother, they portray the hardships she has to suffer because of her. Her memories are full of blame, but also full of an angry love for her mother and often without understanding for her. At one point, she remembers her reaction on Akiko's advice to get married and have babies, to find someone who takes care of her:

I remember thinking how ironic and how convenient that my mother thought of taking care of me only when I was a grown woman. And even then, to delegate the responsibility of that care. But accustomed to nurturing my mother's bouts of coherency, I drowned the memories of myself as a child that
rose to the surface: huddling under the bridge at the Ala Wai, waiting for a fish to take me to an underwater kingdom where I would find my true mother, a mother who would make me dinner so I wouldn't have to buy Ho Hos and cheese nachos at the 7-Eleven; forging my mother's signature on school report cards filled with E's for excellence that she never saw because she was looking into another world; rocking my mother, cradling her head and upper body in my lap... (126/7)

From Akiko's perspective, however, their relation and her role as mother are depicted differently. Akiko's first chapter starts with the event of Beccah's birth, and afterwards there is not a single chapter told from Akiko's perspective in which the baby Beccah and Akiko's love for her is not mentioned. While in Beccah's chapters we get to know a daughter who does not feel well taken care of by her mother, in Akiko's chapters we see a mother lovingly contemplating her baby daughter and trying to fulfill her every wish. She often emphasizes that Beccah is the one thing that keeps her alive: "Blooming in this boundary between Korea and America, between life and death, this child, with the tendril of her body, keeps me from crossing over and roots me to this earth." (116/117) Seen in this context, Akiko's advice to get married and have babies, given at the last time mother and daughter meet, is not as ironic as Beccah believed it to be, especially since Akiko wants Beccah to have children to see how much she loves her: "'Beccah, how will you know how much I love you if you don't have your own children?'" (128)

These two diverging ideas of their relationship are primarily rooted in the different perceptions both narrators have of themselves and each other. They depend, however, also on the different temporal narrative position they find themselves in: Beccah's narration is told from the point of view of the approximately thirty-year-old woman she is "now." There are parts dealing with her present situation, i.e. the time shortly after her mother's death, that are narrated in present

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188 "I look at myself in the mirror now and see the same strands of white streaking across my dark head. ... And I think: It has taken me nearly thirty years, almost all of my life, but finally the wishes I flung out in childhood have come true. My mother is dead." (13)
tense. Her memories of her mother and their life together are narrated in past tense. Beccah thus covers her whole life up to her present. Akiko's temporal narrative position is much more difficult to locate. It might be that she is somewhere between thirty and forty years old when she relates her story, because in her narrative all the parts in which she describes her baby, who must have been born when Akiko was this old, are in present tense. Also, she commemorates at one point the twenty-second anniversary of her mother's death (181/2). Her mother died shortly before she was sold to the Japanese, when Akiko was in her early teens. It is striking that her narrative does not continue after Beccah's early childhood. Akiko thus covers her own past up to the birth of her daughter. Beccah appears in her memories only as a baby, never as a child, teenager, or adult. It is as if Akiko's narration stops where Beccah's can begin, and as if she only provides what is missing in Beccah's memories for a better understanding of her life, person, and love. In Beccah's narration it becomes obvious that although she constantly talks about her mother, she indeed does not know the most important thing about her, i.e. her past as comfort woman which would be crucial to an understanding of her mother. The dialectic mode of this narrative structure, as Elaine H. Kim points out in referring to Ronyoung Kim's *Clay Walls*, almost creates a dialogue; the younger generation does not speak for the older one but with it, the daughter does not speak for the mother but with her.\(^{189}\) It is, however, only almost a dialogue, for the two narrators do not talk to each other but instead only to the implicit narratee or reader.

It is then up to the readers to bring the two narratives together, and it is within them that the "dialogue" takes place, that a different reality is created. The memories, which are placed next to each other as if in a mosaic, and which are told not chronologically, but rather in fragments, slowly start to form an entity and make sense for the readers. They anticipate the understanding that Beccah develops for

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Akiko. This understanding develops throughout the course of the novel and culminates at the end when her mother finally addresses her through a tape she has recorded for Beccah. The reader anticipates Beccah's realization that there is more than only one reality, so that the very perception of what is real might have to be reconsidered.

The reader's perception of Akiko differs from Beccah's, because more is known about Akiko's past and her personality through her narrative. Only after a while does Beccah realize that her perception of her mother might only represent a small fraction of Akiko's true personality. When she meets an old schoolmate who acts as if she was a good friend from Beccah's schooldays, although Beccah does not remember having had any friends, she realizes that she could not only not "trust my mother's stories; I could not trust my own" (34). For the first time she doubts her own impressions of her past. Her doubts grow stronger when she hears how Auntie Reno, the only friend of the family, perceived her mother. When she accuses Reno of having financially exploited her mother, Reno denies this vehemently and describes her memories of Akiko as follows:

"One tough woman. You tink she so out of it all the time, Beccah? Dat she so lolo I can jus' steal her money - not dat I would, mine you - an' she not goin' know it? ... If you tink dat, den you dah one dat's lolo. ... An' I tell you someting else ... before you disrespect me or your maddah again. She knew what is was like for be one orphan, having to beg for everything, every scrap of food or whatevah. She no want you to know dat feelin', like you all alone, no one to turn to. She love your more dan anyting in dis world. So she take care you. ... I don' know if you know dis ... but dat Manoa house yours, free and clear. ... I'm telling you, your maddah was so sharp. You know she save all her money for your? She knew exactly what she made, down to dah last cent in dah Wishing Bowl. She even know wen you wen sneak money for school lunch, field trip, stuff li' dat." (20)

Beccah is surprised by what Reno tells her. She realizes that other people might have perceived her mother quite differently and learns to question her own notions of Akiko. While Beccah sometimes thinks of her mother as a mad woman and strongly
dislikes her trances, Reno considers them a gift and explains them to Beccah as follows:

Some people - not many, but some - get dah gift of talking to the dead, of walking true worlds and seeing things one regula person like you or me don't even know about. Dah spirits love these people, tellin' em for 'do this, do that.' But they hate em, too, jealous of dah living. (9)

I tell you, your maddah knew me like no one else. Dat was her gift. She would look into a person's heart and know em - their heartache, their weakness, whatevah. Because she knew suffahrin' like I no can even imagine. ... Your mother was one survivah. Das how come she can read other people. Das how come she can travel out of dis world into hell, cause she already been there and back and know the way. (203)

Reno's explanation bears much truth in it, for Akiko considered herself dead ever since she was raped for the first time in the camp:

I was twelve when I was murdered, fourteen when I looked into the Yalu River and, finding no face looking back at me, knew that I was dead. I wanted to let the Yalu's currents carry my body to where it might find my spirit again, but the Japanese soldiers hurried me across the bridge before I could jump. (15)

Her body thus lives on, although it has sustained injuries, but her spirit, her true self, leaves her body in the camp and dies, probably because it would have been impossible for her to endure the humiliation, rape, and torture while fully conscious. Had she been successful in committing suicide, which she attempted several times, body and spirit could have been united again, but instead, during the rest of her life, body and spirit often reside separately. With a part of her dead, she is able to act as an intermediary between the spiritual and physical worlds, she becomes a shaman, or mndang in Korean. Shamanism is one of Korea's oldest beliefs and even today, though often modified and mixed with Buddhist or even Christian elements, it is a vital part of Korean culture. The shaman is believed to be able to prevent bad luck, cure sickness and to resolve tensions and conflicts between the living and the dead. Shamans are also able to perform burial rites that will assure a safe passage from this
world into the next. Again, it is up to the readers to find out whether Akiko is a shaman (it is never explicitly said in the text, but can be derived from her performances during her trances) or a "crazy lady," or both.

To the reader, Akiko does not seem crazy, for her narrative is clear and makes sense. She even sounds convincing when she talks about spirits and evil influences or Induk, the spirit of a woman from the camp who has accompanied her ever since her violent death. It is evident that the spirits Akiko mentions, real or not, are the result of her traumatizing experiences in the camp, which were so awful that, even though she physically survived them, she will never be able to live without them. There seem to be different ways in which comfort women reacted to what happened to them. Chung Seo Woon says that her body was destroyed in the camps but that her mind and spirit could not be touched.¹⁹⁰ Akiko tells of many who "cracked," who went crazy. Induk does not "crack," even though on first sight it seems as if she does. She invites death, verbally provoking the Japanese soldiers to kill her. Her mind and spirit remain intact because she manages to die before any harm can be done to them, but her body, brutally maimed by the soldiers, is left by the river, and the other women are not allowed to perform burial rites on it. Her body therefore cannot follow her spirit into the realm of the dead. Her body and spirit are thus separated making the spirit homeless and unable to come to rest. From then on, Induk's spirit accompanies Akiko, who actually is in the opposite situation because she physically survived the camp but spiritually died there.

**Storytelling**

Another kind of narrating that plays an important role is storytelling. When Akiko tells Beccah stories about her past in Korea which sound too good to be true, Beccah turns into a storyteller herself, making up stories about her mother and father and herself by using the imagination typical of children to supplement her mother's

¹⁹⁰ Kim-Gibson 183.
stories with her own favorite movies, such as *West Side Story*, *The Little Princess* and *The Poor Little Rich Girl*. By making up these stories, both Akiko and Beccah, try to escape a reality that otherwise would be too harsh to cope with. Other stories Akiko tells Beccah are about Induk, the Birth Grandmother, and Saja, the Death Messenger, who are characters from her spirit world. She mixes these with fairy-tales, such as the story of Princess Pari. Other tales she tells her are those of the Heavenly Toad or of "the little frog who never listened to its mother." The latter is an actually existing tale; whereas the former appears to be a mixture of different fairy-tales. All three deal with death: Princess Pari rescues her dead parents from hell; the Heavenly Toad kidnaps, so claims Akiko, the unprepared spirit of the dead and brings it to heaven; and the little frog buries its mother in the wrong place. While Akiko comments neither on the Pari story nor on the little frog story and while Beccah believes to recognize herself right away as the main character of each story, Akiko tells her daughter in connection with the story of the Heavenly Toad:

"When I die, I will become your *momju*, guarding and guiding you. I will not leave you. Unless. ... Unless you forget about the Heavenly Toad. ... When I die, you must prepare my body and protect my spirit before the Heavenly Toad angel grabs me and jumps to heaven." (157)

This story and Akiko's interpretation of it confuse Beccah: the Heavenly Toad appears to be a good character, but her mother nevertheless talks about it as if it were a threat. Hidden in this story might be Akiko's dislike of Christianity. She did not love or respect her Christian missionary husband whom she describes as a bigot. He, after all, pretends to save young Akiko but in fact only lusts for her, pretending that he does not know that she is only about fifteen years old when they marry. He does not help or save her at all. Her time at the American mission in Pyongyang is described in some parts as similar to the camp: the girls there get new names ("Mary" in Akiko's case) and have to sleep in stall-like cubicles. She was sold to the Japanese by her older sister who needed money for her dowry and to the missionaries by an old Korean woman she met on her escape from the camp. While, of course, her
treatment in the camp and in the mission cannot be compared, both the Japanese
ockupiers and the Christian missionaries in Korea are similar in constituting a
colonization of the mind, the people, and, in the former case, the country. Akiko,
with her negative experiences with Christianity and her world full of spirits, does not
believe in God and therefore does not want to be taken to heaven by the "Heavenly
Toad angel" after her death. The fairy-tales and stories about spirits are meant to
prepare Beccah for Akiko's death.

Language

Akiko seems to have stopped using language as a serious means of
communication in the camp. She does not use it for factual communication anymore,
but to tell tales. In the camp, the women are beaten by the soldiers when they speak
to each other, they "were forbidden to speak, any language at all." (16) They thus
invent their own way of communicating: "We taught ourselves to communicate
through eye movements, body posture, tilts of the head, or - when we could not see
each other - through rhythmic rustlings between our stalls; in this way we could speak,
in this way we kept our sanity." (16) Induk, the woman whose spirit later
accompanies Akiko, breaks this pattern. She speaks out loud, using language as a
means to reclaim her Korean identity:

To this day, I do not think Induk – the woman who was the Akiko before me
– cracked.191 Most of the other women thought she did because she would
not shut up. One night she talked loud and nonstop. In Korean and in
Japanese, she denounced the soldiers, yelling at them to stop their invasion of
her country and her body. Even as they mounted her, she shouted: I am
Korea, I am a woman, I am alive. I am seventeen, I had a family just like you
do, I am a daughter, I am a sister. ... All through the night she talked,
reclaiming her Korean name, reciting her family genealogy, even chanting the
recipes her mother had passed on to her. (20)

Induk didn't go crazy. She was going sane. She was planning her escape.
(21)

191 The women in the camp were not allowed to keep their names and instead were given random Japanese
names. If one woman of a name died, her "replacement" took on her name.
Language becomes a weapon. Knowing that she cannot defeat the Japanese soldiers with it, Induk uses it against herself: "That is what, in the end, made Induk so special: she chose her own death. Using the Japanese as her dagger, she taunted them with the language and truths they perceived as insults. She sharpened their anger to the point where it equaled and fused with their black hungers. She used them to end her life, to find release." (144) Akiko is unable to follow her. At the mission in Pyongyang, Akiko is not able to hear nor talk at all for some time. After a while, she starts communicating again, but she never really trusts language, does not believe anymore that words as such are true:

My husband speaks four languages: German, English, Korean, and Japanese. ... A scholar who spends his life with the Bible, he thinks he is safe, that the words he reads, the meaning he gathers, will remain the same. Concrete. He is wrong. He shares all his languages with our daughter, though she is not even a year old. She will absorb the sounds, he tells me. But I worry that the different sounds for the same object will confuse her. To compensate, I try to balance her with language I know is true. I watch her with a mother's eye, trying to see what she needs - my breast, a new diaper, a kiss, her toy - before she cries, before she has to give voice to her pain. And each night, I touch each part of her body, waiting until I see recognition in her eyes. I wait until I see that she knows that all of what I touch is her and hers to name in her own mind, before language dissects her into pieces that can be swallowed and digested by others not herself. (21/22)

Names

Names and their meanings as part of language – Asian or Western – need to be looked at as well. Akiko does not use her real Korean name after her stay in the camp and instead keeps using the Japanese name randomly given to her. This name does not have any meaning for her except that it is not her own and that she uses it to indicate that her true self no longer exists and was instead replaced by something called Akiko. The Christian name "Mary" could not take the place of this name, the Christian influence not being strong enough to change anything in Akiko. She was,
which must be remarked, probably named after the Virgin Mary, but since the missionaries soon sensed that this name was not too fitting, they soon believed her to be named after another Mary, Mary Magdalene, the sinner. Akiko, knowing that Christian names do not have any power, lets her husband choose a biblical name, Rebecca, for their daughter. She, instead, secretly names her Bek-hap, "the lily, purest white" (116). Akiko's true name, Soon Hyo, is revealed only in the end, in probably the most important chapter in the book, where she for the first time talks directly to her daughter about her past and her true identity. This is made possible through a cassette Soon Hyo taped for her daughter, to be found by her after her death: "And a thin black cassette tape that will, eventually, preserve a few of the pieces, the secrets, of our lives. I start with our names, my true name and hers: Soon Hyo and Bek-hap. I speak for the time when I leave my daughter, so that when I die, she will hear my name and know that when she cries, she will never be alone." (183).

Beccah finds the tape toward the end of the book. The tape is essential because it unites not only mother and daughter but also the different elements of the novel. For the first time, the mother as a narrator does not talk to an implicit but rather to an explicit narratee. She directly addresses her daughter, telling her the things Beccah was trying to find out, what she indeed needs to know in order to fully understand her mother, their relationship, and herself. On the tape, Soon Hyo performs a burial ceremony for herself, thus acting as a shaman. For the first time, Beccah understands the meaning of this rite she has heard her mother perform so many times for other people. She thus understands not only Soon Hyo's roles as comfort woman and mother but also as a shaman. The tape Soon Hyo recorded for Beccah represents the last piece of storytelling in the novel. This time, however, nothing is made up. Beccah: "... I heard, when I first began playing my mother's tape in the apartment I had chosen for myself, only senseless wails, a high-pitched keening relieved by the occasional gunshot of drums. Still, I listened, but only when I
stopped concentrating did I realize my mother was singing words, calling out names, telling a story" (191).

The first part of the tape is a description of Soon Hyo's mother's death and burial. The second part describes the camp and what she and the other women experienced there. The last part is dedicated to Becca h. Jodi Kim calls the tape "a 'subaltern' archive" that is left for Becca h and argues that, through "the construction of this personal archive, "it is guaranteed that the memories do not die with Soon Hyo/Akiko. Especially from this tape, but also from the fairy-tales and the stories about the spirits, Beccah knows what to do with her mother's dead body. Before her mother is cremated, Beccah prepares the body the way her mother wanted, singing her mother's true name and about her love for her. She sprinkles her mother's ashes over the river behind her mother's house. Only in her narratives and on this tape does Soon Hyo use language again in its original sense, for the purpose of informing, telling all, speaking out. On the tape, she records a short version of what she spoke about throughout the book and is, in fact, content-wise quite similar to Induk's performance in the camp: she talks about her family, her mother, her sisters. She tells of the camp and what happened to Korea. By describing these things, she reclaims her true identity which was hidden ever after the camp. As opposed to Induk, she has someone who can bury her body and perform all the necessary rites for her. Her body will find its spirit and thus find its peace. Through this final act of speaking up, of telling the whole story, she is eventually understood by her daughter and both are reconciled. Through the tape, Beccah recalls an episode she had witnessed as a child. Only once before, so she remembers, has she heard her mother's true name and about the camp, but she was then too young to understand. She remembers her mother shouting at her father: "I know what I speak, for that is my given name. Soon Hyo, the true voice, the pure tongue. I speak of laying down

for a hundred men - and each one of them Saja, Death's Demon Soldier - over and over, until I died. I speak of bodies being bought and sold, of bodies." (195) Her husband forces her to stop and cautions her that it might harm her daughter to hear that her mother was a "prostitute." So maybe to protect her daughter, who indeed would have been too young to understand, Soon Hyo hides her "true voice" and only lets it speak again in the end, when her daughter is a grown woman herself. The two stories meet in the end, and Beccah's memories correspond with her mother's story.

c) The Concept of Belonging in Comfort Woman

By telling her about her own past, Soon Hyo creates a place of belonging for her daughter. It is more a spiritual place, but it is nevertheless a place she can rely on and trust. This is crucial for Soon Hyo, who does not have a home anymore. She does not have a family in Korea (both her parents are dead, her sisters are missing), and even if she had one it would have been difficult for her, if not impossible, to return to a normal life there after what had happened to her in the camp. She does not feel at home in her new country, the United States: "You realize that you have no face and no place in this country." (110) She has, however, a way to make both countries her home. When leaving Korea, she swallows a little bit of earth: "I wanted to taste the earth, metallic as blood, take it into my body so that my country would always be a part of me." (104) She later does the same in the United States. One time, according to Akiko, Induk made her suck the dust of the apartment and the ghost of her husband's dead mother, "to make this - the apartment, the city, the state, and America - home my own." A second time, when pregnant with Beccah, she makes tea with the black dirt from outside her house: "I drank the earth, nourishing her [Beccah] within the womb, so that she would never feel homeless, lost. After her birth, I rubbed that same earth across my nipples and touched it to my daughter's lips, so that, with her first suck, with her first taste of dirt and the salt and the milk that is

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193 In fact, many of the "real" comfort women chose to live outside of Korea because they feared discrimination. Schibel-Yang 20.
me, she would know that I am, and will always be, her home." (113) By eating earth, she is trying to make a home for herself and her daughter. Through the tape Soon Hyo recorded for Beccah, she tells her daughter to do the same. Beccah understands, and at the end, when she sprinkles the ashes of her mother, she touches her fingers to her lips: "'Your body in mine,' I told my mother, 'so you will always be with me, even when your spirit finds its way home. To Korea. To Sulsulham. And across the river of heaven to the Seven Sisters.'" (212) While Akiko creates out of desperation an alternative space inside herself that is neither Korea nor America, Beccah is in a more fortunate position. The space she creates inside herself for her mother is a sign of her reconciliation with her. She gives her mother a place where she can forever belong and draws comfort from this. Soon Hyo thus turns into a literal "comfort woman," a mother offering comfort to her daughter.

In Comfort Woman, the two female protagonists do not suffer identity crises that are caused by immigrating to another country. Their situation is more complicated than that, due to the traumatic experiences that dominate the lives of both. The question of identity is thus not really dealt with; the issues of home and belonging, however, do play important roles, as has been shown above. And while the novel does share certain ideas and elements with other Asian American novels (storytelling, mother–daughter relationship, language as weapon, the "crazy lady"), the result is an entirely different one. Comfort Woman shows that Asian American writing comes in many different forms, and while it stands in the Asian American tradition, it is also distinctively Korean American in its choice of topics.

2. Chang-rae Lee: Native Speaker
Chang-rae Lee's Native Speaker (1995) is certainly the best-known contemporary Korean American novel.194 It covers at least three genres: it is an excellent city novel set in New York City, a spy novel and, most of all, an immigrant novel. There are

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two plots; in one, the narrator Henry Park tells of his private life, in the other of his job as private detective/spy.

So far, interpretations of *Native Speaker* have been dominated by two important aspects, namely whiteness and language.195 Both subjects are important for my reading of the text as well, but I would additionally like to focus on Henry Park's identity and on immigration as a basic theme of the novel.

a) Short Summary
Henry Byong-ho Park is a Korean American in his early thirties. He seems to be a lonely person; his wife Lelia has just left him, his parents both passed away a while ago, he does not seem to have any friends, and at work everybody, including Henry, is a loner. Loneliness, however, is never really made the subject of the book, since Henry does not seem to be bothered by it. Bit by bit, Henry tells of his past. His narration is associative and without any real chronology. He tells of his wife Lelia, how they met, their marriage, the death of their child. He relates childhood memories that do not seem very happy, and he describes his work at the "firm." Especially his last two jobs were of importance: one of them was to find out everything about a Filipino American psychologist called Emile Luzan, which he did by becoming his patient. For the first time in his career, however, Henry is close to failing: he almost gives himself away. The other job, his last one, is also difficult for him. He is supposed to spy on the politician John Kwang and therefore starts working as a volunteer for Kwang's election campaign. The better he gets to know the politician of Korean origin, though, the more he is fascinated by his person. Only when Kwang finally disappoints him is Henry capable to accomplish his job and deliver important evidence against him. The novel ends in relative harmony: Lelia and Henry get back together. Henry stops his job at the "firm," which so far had stood between them, and starts helping Lelia with her work as a speech therapist.

This quick summary of the novel might be misleading, though. In fact, *Native Speaker* is a multi-layered novel in which events often are ambiguous. The plot as described above is only the mere backdrop for a complex conflict that takes place within Henry. In order to get a better understanding of Henry, it is necessary to put together the bits and pieces he relates on different topics.

b) Where It All Starts: Childhood and Youth

Henry Park was born in the United States and is therefore an American citizen. For him this is pure chance: "My citizenship is an accident of birth, my mother delivering me on this end of a long plane ride from Seoul." (334) Exactly in the moment that his immigrant parents arrive in their new country, he is born. He himself is an immigrant, too, but by means of a simple law he is American at the same time. This simultaneousness of being both, immigrant and American, will be symptomatic for Henry for the rest of the novel.

From an early age, Henry confronts questions of identity. The contrast between his Korean parents and his Korean looks and his (white) American surroundings are too big to be ignored. Henry remembers:

"… for a time in my boyhood I would often awake before dawn and step outside on the front porch. It was always perfectly quiet and dark, as if the land were completely unpeopled save for me. No Korean father or mother, no taunting boys or girls, no teachers showing me how to say my American name. I'd then run back inside and look in the mirror, desperately hoping in that solitary moment to catch a glimpse of who I truly was but looking back at me was just the same boy again, no clearer than before, unshakably lodged in that difficult face." 323 [my emphasis]

Henry tries to be an inconspicuous child who blends well into his surroundings. Like his parents, he wants to be as unobtrusive as possible, not a burden to anyone. "So call me what you will. An assimilist, a lackey. A duteous foreign-faced boy. I have already been what you can say or imagine, every version of the newcomer who is always fearing and bitter and sad." (160) At an early age, Henry is thus trying to

obscure his difference by becoming almost invisible through immaculate behavior and seamless adaption to his environment. He will later improve this camouflaging skill and make it his profession. In his marriage with Lelia, he plays his role as husband perfectly, too. He is everything that is expected of him, but never really himself, which leads eventually to the end of his marriage:

On paper, by any known standard, I was an impeccable mate. I did everything well enough, was romantic and sensitive and silly enough, I made love enough, was paternal enough, big brotherly, just a good friend enough, father-to-my-son enough, forlorn enough, and then even bull-headed and dull and macho enough, to make it all seamless. For ten years she hadn't realized the breadth of what I had accomplished with my exacting competence, the daily work I did, which unto itself became an unassailable body of cover. (161)

A Korean American Family

Henry's family is extremely important in his quest to find out who he is. He is shaped by the influence of his immigrant parents and by living with his white American wife. It is by drawing similarities and finding out about contrasts that Henry tries to position himself, tries to discover what is Korean, what American, and what is maybe both.

His ability to adapt perfectly to certain environments and situations is something that Henry developed partly by himself because he noticed at an early age that difference might cause negative reactions. For the most part, however, he took this behaviour over from his parents. His father, for example, always came to watch Henry play baseball, but he never cheered him on and instead always stood quietly by. The mother never dared to ask a neighbour for lacking ingredients and instead rather ruined a meal. Later in life, Henry sees in their behavior the exaggerated dependence of the immigrant on the new country: "[W]e believed in anything American, in impressing Americans, in making money, in polishing apples in the dead of the night, perfectly pressed pants, perfect credit, being perfect, shooting black people, watching our stores and offices burn down to the ground." (52/53)
In spite of his critical attitude towards them, Henry's parents remain an important influence in his life. He often contemplates, for example, what his late mother would have thought about certain people or situations:

My mother, in her hurt, invaded, Korean way, would have counseled me to distrust him, this clever Japanese. Then, too, she would have advised against my marriage to Lelia, the lengthy Anglican goddess, who'd measure me ceaselessly while I slept, continually appraise our vast differences, count up the ways. (15)

She believed that displays of emotion signaled a certain failure between people. ... I thought she possessed the most exquisite control over the muscles of her face. She seemed to have the subtle power of inflection over them, the way a tongue can move air. (31)

The mother, who never wanted to stay in the United States, sticks to old Korean views on the Japanese and ceaselessly emphasizes the difference between their (Korean) family and the Americans. Firmly believing in controlling emotions in the presence of strangers, "American" openness and emotionality seemed strange to her. She did not believe in the American dream for immigrants of color – in her opinion there was a limit to what they could achieve, no matter how hard they tried. About Kwang, the politician, she would have thought: "Didn't he know he could only get so far with his face so different and broad?" Kwang's wish to become mayor of New York would have been absolute hubris for her. She simply thought that life means endless suffering.196

Henry's father, on the other hand, is the perfect immigrant. Like in a typical Korean immigrant story, he comes as a graduate of a Korean elite university to the United States and finds himself working in grocery stores. By working incredibly hard, he manages to build up a small chain of stores and to move with his son to a wealthy neighborhood (his wife has passed away by then). For him, the American dream becomes true, but it does not make him a happy man, for his family is incomplete and he does not have any time for his son with whom he does not get
along anymore. Though part of the American dream, he never becomes American. Growing up, Henry views him as utterly Korean, as completely out of place. He is ashamed of his father's faulty English and fights with him constantly.

The absolute alien in Henry's family, however, is Ahjuhma. She is a woman who one day suddenly appears in Henry's life. His father arranged for her to come from Korea to take care of their household. She lives in a separated part of their house and spends most of her time in the kitchen. She does not attempt to learn any English at all or to meet anybody. The only people she talks to are Henry and his father. She is, as one of Henry's white friends from school remarks, "a total alien." (78) Henry does not like her and only talks to her when necessary. Even when he recognizes later that for his father she is more than just a housekeeper, she does not become part of his idea of a family. Lelia finds it intolerable that Ahjuhma fulfills the tasks of a homemaker, mother, and even lover, but is not accepted as such. She cannot believe that Henry, during all the years that the woman worked for his father and him, not once asked for her name. The woman is always simply called "ahjuhma," the Korean way of addressing an older woman to whom one is not related.197 When Lelia meets the woman, she wants to do better than Henry and tries to communicate with her, but is rejected by her in a rude way. The argument Henry and Lelia have about Ahjuhma marks a moment in the novel in which the cultural difference between them becomes visible. Henry does not understand Ahjuhma, nor does he like her much, but this is not reflected – as Lelia assumes – in his ignorance about her name. As in many Asian languages, in Korean people are often not addressed by their names. There are special ways of addressing spouses, relatives, friends, colleagues, superiors, and even strangers, and most of the time it is more polite to address them this way than by their name. Only younger people are called directly by their names. Lelia, who calls her parents by their first names, does not

196 "San konno, san itta," behind the mountain is another mountain, seemed to have been her motto. 333
197 "Ahjuhma" is a very common way of addressing someone in Korean. In the novel "ma'am" is suggested as the American equivalent.
known this. She is trying to communicate with Ahjuhma but does not realize that she is getting too close to her, that she is not respecting her privacy, that she is forcing her way into the woman's territory. While trying to "save" the woman, she does not notice that the woman does not want to be saved and, most of all, does not wish to have contact to her, the "American." At this moment of their argument, Henry distinguishes between Americans (and that means Lelia) and Koreans (including himself): "Americans live on a first-name basis. She didn't understand that there weren't moments in our language – the rigorous, regimental one of family and servants – where the woman's name could have naturally come out." (69) It is in moments like this that he realizes how Korean he is. Even though Ahjuhma is also an "alien" for him and the embodiment of all things Korean that he dislikes, and even though he often wishes to be more American, he has to admit that he is not like Lelia, not like "Americans."

If Ahjuhma embodies everything strange and alien, then Lelia is the "native."198 Her name already signals whiteness, and when Henry meets her for the first time, it is her whiteness he notices first: "I noticed she was very white, the skin of her shoulder almost blue, opalescent, unbelievably pale considering where she lived [El Paso]." (9) Henry continuously points out the visual differences between himself and his "American wife," for example by calling her "the lengthy Anglican goddess." (15) Lelia is indeed quite different from Henry. While he does not talk much about his feelings, life, or job and has many secrets, Lelia is open and direct. One might even say that in the two persons of Henry and Lelia the contrast between Korea and the United States is highlighted once again. Lelia, for example, is described as an almost stereotypical American. Her character is, as Min Song has pointed out, amazingly underdeveloped and only roughly outlined.199 The main reason for this, however, can be found in the narrative perspective. Henry is the sole narrator and

198 Henry calls white Americans "natives." He is using the term, I would say, in order to emphasize the difference to those who are still visibly immigrants.
everything is seen from his perspective and in relation to his person. It is Lelia's role to be Henry's American mirror; marrying a white woman has not made him more "American," but instead makes him face his difference day after day. Lelia's directness encourages this. When they meet for the first time, in her direct way she describes how she perceived him: "I saw you right away when you came in...You kept pulling at your tie and then tightening it back up. I saw a little kid in a hot church." (9) When she leaves him, she leaves behind a list describing Henry, a list "of who I was." (1) At first, Henry takes the list extremely seriously, and it takes him some time to realize that the list is not a complete description of his self, but only names some aspects.

Lelia's parents are also described quite sketchily and stereotypically. They are only mentioned to explain the background Lelia stems from. Molly and Stew are alcoholics, divorced, and rich. They both live in Massachusetts. They were open-minded about their daughter marrying a person of color, even though Henry remembers moments of unintended racism. When Lelia recalls that Molly always liked Henry, he answers "I'm her exotic. ... Like a snow leopard. Except I'm not porcelain." Stew – "Groton, Princeton, Harvard Business School...Chief Executive Officer. Do not fuck with this man." – praises Henry's "Oriental culture" and, meaning well, adds: "You Koreans are really doing a number on them [the Japanese], in certain areas. You're kicking some major butt around the world." (119-22) Stew and Molly obviously see in Henry a Korean and Asian and not a Korean American.

Even though there had been difficulties in Henry and Lelia's relationship before, the death of their son Mitt is decisive for their separation. Lelia mourns his death openly, while Henry withdraws into his shell. She blames him for this several times and once even stresses the ethnic difference between them by calling her mourning self a "mad white lady in the attic" (119, my emphasis). She describes Henry as the Asian stoic who perfectly and without any visible emotions does his duties as a mourning father. Mitt, their perfect and happy child, dies on his seventh birthday.
Half-white and half-Korean, he embodies the chasm within his father but he does not live it. He speaks perfect English, but – in contrast to his father – does not mind the broken English of his Korean grandfather. On Sundays, Lelila sends him to Korean school so that he picks up some Korean as well, but Henry does not approve: "...my hope was that he would grow up with a singular sense of his world, a life univocal, which might have offered him the authority and confidence that his broad half-yellow face could not. Of course this is assimilist sentiment, part of my own ugly and half-blind romance with the land." (267) "...I was the one who was hoping whiteness for Mitt, being fearful of what I might have bestowed on him: all that too-ready devotion and honoring, and the chilly pitch of my blood, and then that burning language that I once presumed useless, never uttered and never lived" (285).

Henry wants to spare his son of the chasm he feels but does not realize that his son might not feel split. Mitt's perfect little life, however, does not last long. Like a "tragic mulatto," he is doomed to die: he is crushed to death in a "dog pile," playing with white kids from the neighborhood who, after some initial racist remarks, have become his friends. Here, Chang-rae Lee plays with the motif of the "tragic Eurasian," which can be found in many early works by white Americans on Asians. Like tragic mulattoes, they are torn between their good, white and their evil, colored half. Because of their inner conflict, they are often doomed to die young. Lee was probably aware of this literary motif, and it is therefore most interesting that he lets Mitt, who bridges both cultures so perfectly, die that young. This can be seen as a sign that, at least at this point of the novel, there is no Korean American solution – Henry is still torn between his Korean background and his American life. Since Henry cannot really identify with either of these two aspects, which are represented by the respective members of his family, it is only natural that in the beginning of the novel, when his identity conflict is most explicit, he is left without any family: both of

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200 In his second novel, *A Gesture Life*, another half-Korean character appears. Again Lee uses the motif, which is of course also a stereotype, and has her turn into a loose woman, but in the end she does not die and finds her way back to normal life.
his parents are dead, Leila has left him, and Mitt has died as well.

c) Profession: Native Informant
Henry strictly separates his private life from his job. Nobody in his family, not even Lelia, knows how Henry earns his money. He describes his work at the "firm" as follows:

We casually spoke of ourselves as business people. Domestic travelers. We went wherever there was a need … In a phrase, we were spies… We weren’t the kind of figures you naturally thought of or maybe even hoped existed. … We chose instead to deal in people. Each of us engaged our own kind, more or less. Foreign workers, immigrants, first-generationals, neo-Americans. I worked with Koreans, Pete with Japanese. We split up the rest, the Chinese, Laotians, Singaporeans, Filipinos, the whole transplanted Pacific Rim. Grace handled Eastern Europe; Jack, the Mediterranean and Middle East; the two Jimmys, Baptiste and Perez, Central America and Africa. (17)

The "firm" thus uses "ethnic spies," native informants, who spy on their kind to find out the information demanded by their clients. Immigrants are their prime target. There is a high demand for their work and "no other firm with any ethnic coverage to speak of" (18). The maxim of Dennis Hoagland, head of the firm, is "to be a true spy of identity ... you must be a spy of the culture." (206) The firm deals with identity narratives: a fake identity with a fake past is invented in order to get to know as much as possible about the background and identity of the "object." Ethnicity becomes an asset. At first, Henry considers his job his vocation. He, whose identity does not seem fixed, loves it to redefine himself again and again:

I had always thought that I could be anyone, perhaps several anyones at once. Dennis Hoagland and his private firm had conveniently appeared at the right time, offering the perfect vocation for the person I was, someone who could reside in his one place and take half-steps out whenever he wished. … I found a sanction from our work, for I thought I had finally found my truest place in the culture. (127)

Henry, experienced in being unobtrusive and inconspicuous from youth on and additionally with no family and friends to speak of (there is only Lelia left, but she
walks out on him), is especially well-suited for the job. Henry himself describes his colleague, Pete Ichibata, as the perfect spy, but many of Pete's attributes are also true for Henry:

Pete makes a good spook but a good spook has no brothers, no sisters, no father or mother. He's intentionally lost that huge baggage, those encumbering remnants of blood and flesh, and because of this he carries no memory of a house, no memory of a land, he seems to have emerged from nowhere. He's brought himself forth, self-cesarean. (173)

There is, however, one great difference between Henry and Pete, and it is this difference that causes Henry to fail in his job as a spy: he does not have any family left, but he still remembers his parents, their lives, and their country, which seems to be his as well. As much as he wishes to have "brought himself forth" and as hard he tries to ignore the memories unnerving him, he does not succeed.

The two jobs in which he fails miserably are the last ones he is assigned to. Henry feels comfortable with the person he is to spy on, he feels understood by Emile Luzan, who does not know why Henry really became his patient. He confides more and more from his real past to the psychologist instead of making up, as usual, a fake identity: "For the first time I found myself short of my story, my chosen narrative." (22) Luzan touches Henry's innermost feelings when he assures him, "You'll be yourself again, I promise." (22) Just moments before Henry is ready to tell Luzan everything, to tell him the truth about the reason why he is there and the truth about his person, Henry's colleagues intervene and take over. Luzan is later killed, and it remains unclear whether the firm's client in Luzan's case is responsible for his death. After this incident, Henry is no longer the same: "Is this what I have left of the doctor? That I no longer simply can flash a light inside a character, paint a figure like Kwang with a momentary language, but that I know the greater truths reside in our necessary fictions spanning human event and time?" (206) In addition to these new insights Henry has in dealing with people, another dangerous factor comes up when he is observing John Kwang: "I was employing my own life as material for my
alter identity." (181)

d) The Ethnic Other
Like Henry's father, John Kwang is the perfect immigrant for whom the American dream became true. Different from Henry's father, though, he has managed to break out of the isolation of immigrant life and become a politician and thus a public figure. Not only is he successful and visionary, he is somebody that is regarded a role model for others. In contrast to Henry's father, he has managed to become "American" and get rid of the stigma of the immigrant. His picture can be found in stores owned by immigrants, and this makes Henry think, "You are the model by which they will work and live. You are their hope. And all this because you are such a natural American, first thing and last, if something other in between." (326) The difference between him and Henry's parents can be mainly found in his self-confidence and a certain fearlessness: "He displayed an ambition I didn't recognize, or more, I hadn't yet envisioned as something a Korean man would find significant or worthy of energy and devotion; he didn't seem afraid like my mother and father, who were always wary of those who would try to shame us or mistreat us." (139) Also, Kwang speaks without an accent, and even his body, which naturally looks Korean, appears differently. He has, according to Henry, "short Korean legs," but he walks differently - "he didn't sport the short choppy step of our number, but seemed instead to stride in luxurious borrowed lengths." (137/138) The story of Kwang's immigration sounds like many others (210/211), but what Henry finds so fascinating about him and his story is that Kwang "began to think of America as a part of him, maybe even his." (211) This is, of course, what Henry and maybe every immigrant desires – the ultimate fulfillment of an American dream in which the color of the skin does not matter anymore. Through his shining example, he convinces people that they can be just like him, achieve the same for themselves, and hence become part of a bigger entity, the nation — e pluribus unum. This is also the main weapon in his campaign for his political career. His party is a party of immigrants: "Instead he had made his the
party of livery boys and nannies and wok cooks and seamstresses and delivery boys, and his wealthiest patrons were the armies of small-business owners through whose coffers passed all of Queens, by the nickel and dime." (143) He wins his voters with the American dream by embodying the American dream: "In ten different languages you say Kwang is like you. You will be an American." (143)

The more Henry observes Kwang, the better he gets to know him – and in the end he thinks that he knows him better than anybody else (140) – the closer he feels attached to him and the more he admires him. Soon he is not capable anymore of delivering meaningful reports about Kwang to the firm: "With John Kwang I wrote exemplary reports but I couldn't accept the fact that Hoagland would be combing through them. It seemed like an unbearable encroachment. An exposure of a different order, as if I were offering a private fact about my father or mother to a complete stranger in one of our stores." (147) Jack, Henry's closest colleague, soon recognizes this and notes, "Now, I am seeing what you write of Kwang, the way you present him with something extra. It is evident that you cannot help yourself. Something takes you over." (291) He believes that Kwang's influence on Henry is too big and that Henry cannot judge Kwang correctly and advises him to step back from the job. As in the Luzan job, Henry feels understood by Kwang - "[s]imply, it felt good not having to explain any further" – not only as a human being, but also as a second-generation immigrant of color. (182)

Only after Kwang lets him down, is Henry capable of betraying him. Kwang confesses that he commissioned an attack on his own office in the course of which two people were killed. One of them was, according to Kwang, a spy. Kwang's political career is in a crisis, and it is interesting to observe that the more he feels the effects of the crisis, the more "Korean" he appears. He now resembles more Henry's father, and turns from a family man into a loner. (296) His perfect appearance is gone, he neglects it totally. One day he even comes to see Henry in the office, which is installed temporarily in the basement of Kwang's house, in pajamas and a gown. He
does not talk in his perfect English to Henry anymore, but instead in Korean, and not even standard Korean, but a dialect. While drunk he sings Korean songs, "...his Korean accent getting thicker and heavier." (297) Kwang's character regresses, with him turning from a perfect "American" back into the "Korean" he used to be. Interesting in this context is also Kwang's house, which carries almost symbolic meaning: he lives in a "stately Victorian house, ... a showplace for the Kwangs' many guests and visiting dignitaries." All the things Korean, the jars with the smelly kimchi, are hidden in the basement. The house is an American façade with a hidden, Korean inside. Henry prefers the basement to the upper levels, stating that the rest of the place "feels borrowed to me, unlived in." (302) While it is typical for Henry to prefer staying in a basement, hidden away, it is interesting that it is – at the same time – the Korean part of the house.201

Even though in the end Kwang disappoints Henry, the work with him and his many immigrant followers leaves a great impression on him. He starts to identify more and more with immigrants and their life stories: "I have steadily become a compiler of lives. I am writing a new book of the land. ... And the more I read and remember the more their story is the same. The story is mine. How I come by plane, come by boat." (279) One of his tasks while working for Kwang was to take care of the ggeh, the "money club." Ggeh are common in Korea, but also among Korean immigrants abroad as a means to save up money for larger investments. Each member regularly pays a certain sum and after a while is paid out the lump sum that has accumulated. Kwang has built up a gigantic money club, to which anyone can donate a couple of dollars and, in needy moments, ask for money in return. Henry loves the idea and identifies totally with it. Repeatedly he talks of "our money club." (280, emphasis mine) With Kwang's help, he gets a better idea of the American dream, immigrants, his own family, himself, and even of Ahjuhma: "They speak to

201 Henry also likes the cramped and lightless apartment the firm sometimes uses for special jobs (156f) and dislikes the loft Lelia and he were sharing – it is too big, too open, a "dysfunctional place." (23f)
me, as John Kwang could always, not simply in new accents or notes but in the ancient untold music of a newcomer's heart, sonorous with longing and hope." (304)

For the first time in his life, he feels the urge to speak Korean, a language he despised all his life, in order to be able to communicate with immigrants. (316)

One of the reasons why Henry feels close to John Kwang is their similar background. This similarity is also reflected in their outer appearances, turning Henry almost into Kwang's doppelgänger. Even before Henry takes on the Kwang-job, his colleague Jack observes, "Sometimes I think you'll look like him, Parky, in fifteen years or so." (37) Repeatedly, Henry serves as stand-in for interview rehearsals (92, 99), and several times he is mistaken for Kwang (253, 305). These, of course, might be accidental situations in which the respective people see an Asian man and think of Kwang immediately. However, Henry also feels the affinity to Kwang and remarks about their relationship: "you might say that one was the outlying version of the other." (138) In the regression of his character, Kwang later turns into someone who resembles more Henry's father than the person he formerly was. This does not contradict the fact that there is a similarity between Henry and Kwang; Lelia remarks about Henry's father: "He's just a more brutal version of you." (58) Henry also knows what she is talking about when she says that he is doing his "father's act:" "When real trouble hits, I lock up." (158)

It is important for Henry's development that he realizes that there is something of himself in both men, his father and John Kwang. Being an immigrant and the child of immigrants suddenly acquires a different meaning for Henry. Whereas before, he always saw himself and his family adrift as lone immigrants in a predominantly white world, he later learns to see himself as a part of a group. Whereas before, being an immigrant was a stigma for him, it now seems to be something normal, something one can even be proud of. This of course improves Henry's attitude towards his immigrant father immensely.
e) Language and the Native Speaker

His new attitude towards immigrants and to his own person becomes most evident in Henry's relationship to language – as the title of the novel proposes. As a child, Henry has to undergo speech therapy because of his faulty English. His therapist is an "ancient chalk-white woman" (233) who does not manage to perfect his English. This is amazing, since Henry was – as we know – born and raised in the United States; and even if Korean was the dominant language at home, it has to be assumed that he is a native speaker of English. Henry explains the fact that he remains "between" both languages by mentioning psychological reasons:

I will always make bad errors of speech. I remind myself of my mother and father, fumbling in front of strangers. Lelia says there are certain mental pathways of speaking that can never be unlearned. Sometimes I'll still say riddle for little, or bent for vent, though without any accent and so whoever's present just thinks I've momentarily lost my train of thought. But I always hear myself displacing the two languages, conflating them – maybe conflagrating them – for there is so much rubbing and friction, a fire always threatens to blow up between the tongues. (234)

When Lelia and Henry meet for the first time, Henry remarks: "People like me are always thinking about still having an accent." (12) Lelia responds: "'You pay attention to what you're doing. If I had to guess, you're not a native speaker…." (12) Henry is a native speaker, but by overly paying attention to his ethnicity, he also becomes extremely self-conscious of his speech. When he first meets Lelia, almost all of his thoughts regard his ethnicity. He assumes, for example, that the person who introduced them "must have thought, let my Asian friend in the suit have a pleasant moment with her." (9) Lelia "was looking at me closely, maybe wondering what a last name like Park meant ethnically." (10), "I asked her if she had ever kissed an Asian before." (13) Lelia, the speech therapist and "standard-bearer" (12), is of course someone that makes him feel very conscious of his language. When the two get back together again, they communicate more physically than verbally. Since Henry feels more comfortable with his immigrant background, we can assume that
he is less conscious about his outer appearance and language and accepts them as they are. He even starts missing his father's English: "I think I would give most anything to hear my father's talk again, the crash and bang and stop of his language, always hurtling by." (337) And, most of all, he starts understanding his father: "And when I consider him, I see how my father had to retool his life to the ambitions his meager knowledge of the language and culture would allow, invent again the man he wanted to be. … I am his lone American son, blessed with every hope and quarter he could provide." (333) Henry no longer wishes to be invisible and reconciles his American and his immigrant Korean backgrounds. He realizes that there is no fixed definition of who he is, and that a defining list, like the one Lelia left for him when she went away, does not exist. The definitions, Lelia's and his own, can only describe a part of him at a certain moment.

Therefore, in the end, Henry manages to make different statements about himself, and trivial as they may seem, they are a big step towards his recognition that his self consists of many aspects: "I know I'm American because I order too much when I eat Chinese." (326) "We Koreans have reinvented the idea of luck as mostly bad, and try to do everything we can to prevent it." (327) Watching mostly white, young males protesting against Kwang, Henry thinks, "By rights I am an American as anyone, as graced and flawed and righteous as any of these people chanting for fire in the heart of his house," but at the same time he can identify with immigrants: "And yet I can never stop considering the pitch and drift of their forlorn boats on the sea, the movements that must be endless, promising nothing to their numbers within, headlong voyages scaled in a lyric of search, like the great love of Solomon." (335)

The last chapter has a peaceful atmosphere and reflects Henry's love for the city of New York and his newly discovered attraction to multiculturalism. He remembers Mitt and his parents, but now his memories are without sadness or bitterness. He cooks a hot Korean soup for Lelia after one of his mother's recipes, and Lelia eats it even though she does not see the point of eating a spicy hot soup on
a hot day. The novel ends with Lelia pronouncing the names of her non-native speaker students, an ode to multiculturalism: "Now, she calls out each one as best as she can, taking care of every last pitch and accent, and I hear her speaking a dozen lovely and native languages, calling all the difficult names of who we are." (349)

f) Closing Reflections on Native Speaker
The identity conflict in Native Speaker is much more like conflicts found in the "classic" Asian American novels than, for example, in its fellow Korean American novel Comfort Woman. Lee shows a man searching for his seIf, which is located somewhere between Koreanness and Americanness. In the beginning, he assumes that the two are irreconcilable. Loathing the former, he strives for the latter, feeling, however, that this leaves him incomplete and with an artificially constructed identity. In the course of the novel, the protagonist slowly starts to find a way to embrace his Korean background and actually to be proud of being the descendent of immigrants.

While there are many parallels to the identity conflict in No-No Boy or even China Men, Native Speaker is also distinctively different from those older works in that the conflict is much more layered. Henry Park is already part of U.S.-American society, he does not have to prove himself anymore. He faces a conflict within himself rather than one against a society that does not want him. He has to come to terms with issues such as class, whiteness, language, and immigration, and I would therefore claim that the identity conflict in Native Speaker has reached another level.

In contrast to Comfort Woman, however, the Korean aspect is less visible. While Henry is described as a Korean American and his family is from Korea, their origin is not the main issue. This can also be seen in the fact that Korean history is not mentioned once. The novel is thus firmly rooted in the American present.

3. The Korean American Loner: Three Novels by Leonard Chang
Leonard Chang so far has published three novels: in 1996 his first novel The Fruit 'N
Food, in 1998 Dispatches from the Cold, and in 2001 Over the Shoulder. A Novel of Intrigue. All three novels are distinctively Korean American in that they either deal with Korean American issues or are populated by Korean American characters. These Korean Americans, however, are often quite unusual, which makes Chang's work an interesting subject both for this study and for literary research in general. Chang's books have gained popularity in Asian American Studies and are now often used in Asian American literature courses.

In the following, I will first describe the three novels and then will give a concluding analysis on how the issues of identity, home, and belonging are dealt with in them.

a) The Fruit 'N Food
The atmosphere in The Fruit 'N Food is dominated by paranoia and violence. The protagonist, Tom Pak, is in his mid-twenties and comes from Boston to New York. Being without money, he starts working in a grocery store, The Fruit 'N Food, run by a Korean couple. Tom Pak himself is Korean American, but he has hardly any relationship to Korea or Korean people. He lived in Korea briefly after the death of his mother, but did not like it there. He has never gotten along well with his father and does not speak any Korean.

Mr. and Mrs. Rhee, the owners of the store, are "typical" Korean grocers. They work extremely hard and have their mind fixed on the college tuition for their daughter June. Mrs. Rhee is a strict and very emotional, almost hysterical woman. Mr. Rhee, quite in contrast, is kind and quiet. Before Tom starts working at the store, there have been already four robberies, always by black people. Tom is employed to help in the store, but also to put a stop to the robberies and the continuous shoplifting. Mrs. Rhee's overt racism against African Americans at first bothers Tom, but soon it seems almost justified given what happens at the store. Tom has to fight

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202 Leonard Chang, The Fruit 'N Food (Seattle: Black Heron, 1996)
Leonard Chang, Dispatches from the Cold (Seattle: Black Heron, 1998)
his own growing prejudices and paranoia, which is increased by his frequent sleeplessness. He becomes restless and tense as soon as black people move around the store conspicuously or when he, after work, sees black youths that seem to be gang members. His paranoia reaches a climax after the store is – in Tom's absence – robbed again. Tom has witnessed shoplifting and disrespectful behavior towards him and the Rhees, and when again someone tries to steal something from the store, Tom pulls a weapon. Nobody is hurt, but due to the incident, the black population starts to boycott the store and stages demonstrations in front of it. At one point, the situation gets out of control and the store is looted and destroyed and Tom beaten up. Tom, who meanwhile has had a fall-out with the Rhees, especially with Mrs. Rhee, drifts around the neighborhood, not knowing where to go or what to do and witnesses how Mr. Harris, a nice old man and one of the few friendly black regulars at the store is harassed and robbed by members of an Asian gang. Again, Tom pulls his gun, this time not to defend the store but Mr. Harris. However, he is shot himself and falls into a coma that lasts several months and permanently loses his sight. The novel starts with Tom on his sickbed, which provides a premonition of violence and disaster.

Chang picked a typical Korean American topic – Korean shopkeepers and their points of friction with the African American communities – and turned it into a novel told from an interesting point of view. The novel does reflect well the growing fear and tension in the store and the individual's change from a passive onlooker to someone actively involved in a racial conflict. The description of the conflict itself is well-written, too. However, Chang only concentrates on the


203 Korean American shopkeepers can be found in several works by Korean Americans and others. Famous examples in film are the shopkeepers in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* and *Menace II Society*. Ice Cube's song, quoted above, also deals with Korean American shopkeepers. In Korean American literature, there are Henry Park's father in *Native Speaker* and two characters in Patti Kim's *A Cab Called Reliable* who earn their living as shopkeeper. In Korean American art, Sung Ho Choi's *Korean Roulette* (1992) and *Choi's Market* (1993), as well as Mo Bahc's *Learning American II* (1993) and some of Y. David Chung's works deal with the issue. In all examples mentioned here, the main issues are the robbing of Korean American stores and the violence
immediate causes and effects and not on the real reasons for them.\textsuperscript{204}

b) \textit{Dispatches from the Cold}

\textit{Dispatches from the Cold} has an unusual narrative perspective. The main plot is told by a narrator, who relies on notes he has written down 15 years ago. Occasionally, he interrupts his own narration to comment on the notes and thus turns into a meta-narrator. Not much is known about the narrator; not even his name is disclosed. He seems to be without friends and family and lives by himself in a small, untidy apartment in Long Island. He used to be a teacher but has just lost his job and therefore starts working as a dishwasher in a diner. Letters from a certain Farrel Gorden addressed to his sister Mona, who seemed to have lived at the apartment before the narrator moved in, arrive at the narrator's apartment. He intends to forward them to Mona sometime, but soon he starts to read them and they become an essential part of his life.

Gorden works at a store for sporting goods in a mall in New Hampshire. In his letters, he tells his sister about his girlfriend Shari, his new boss, Roger Shin, whom he hates and with whose wife he soon starts to have an affair. His language in the letters is rough, the grammar and punctuation are faulty, and there are many curses. He, for example, writes about the dismissal of his old boss, Roger Shin's predecessor:

\begin{quote}
... shit I knew that I was Mannys hire and whatever they did to him they could do to me, and I was making some decent money and now some little shit from upstairs was gonna come in and fuck around? I was getting pissed about this and wanted to meet this guy who was supposed to be my new boss. What was he some kind of superman or something? (23)
\end{quote}

The narrator starts to imagine Gorden and his life based on his letters. The letters are his inspiration, and whatever is not mentioned in them, he makes up himself. He invents whole dialogues and descriptions of persons and events, and thus the involved.
narration develops out of a mixture of "facts" culled from the letters and the narrator's fantasy. That he sometimes goes too far in imagining the details of Gorden's life can be seen in some of his comments. He remarks the following after having extensively described a sex scene between Gorden and Shari:

I admit that some of what I have been describing wasn't exactly how Gorden had written it. It seemed obvious to me at the time that this is what he had been doing, and my interpretation of his letters may have been a bit unusual, but they seem justified if only because I knew there was a certain amount of restraint, at least in the area of sex life with Shari, at least in the area of sex, when Gorden wrote his sister. Of course he wouldn't tell her about his sex life with Shari, and if he did, not in the same amount of detail that I have. (50)

At first, the narrator is on neutral grounds, but time after time, he is emotionally drawn into the action described in the letters and considers intervention. This happens for the first time when Gorden starts treating his girlfriend Shari worse and worse, something that eventually results in her suicide. But the narrator finally acts after a second incident: he writes a letter warning Shin after Gorden talks about killing him in his letters. Shin's wife had confessed her affair, and Shin had consequently fired Gorden. The letter arrives too late, Gorden kills Shin and, looking for his sister, meets the narrator. The two worlds meet, a small fight breaks out, the narrator escapes, and the story ends.

The mood of *Dispatches from the Cold* is characterized by the ubiquitous winter atmosphere, the bleakness of the mall, and the white trash life of Gorden Farell. Neither the main character Gorden nor the narrator is Korean. Instead, an almost marginal character, Roger Shin, is Korean. The narrator imagines that Shin came to the United States as a child and therefore still has a slight accents: "So, Shin was Korean. Maybe he was an immigrant, judging from his accent – coming to America

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204 For an attempt to list the real reasons, see section on *sa-i-gu* further on.
205 In fact, the ethnicity of narrator is unknown. It seems as if Chang wanted him to be without any family or ethnic ties, since he is not only without family, but is – on top of everything else - adopted. The novel is devoid of any descriptions of his outer appearance, and no reactions to Gorden's racist remarks on Shin can be found.
as a child but still not fully ridding himself of his first language inflections." (33) Maybe his wife, Helen Shin, is also of Korean origin; in any case, she is Asian. In contrast to her husband, she supposedly speaks English without an accent. She and her husband always communicate in English. By having the couple described from Gorden's perspective, they seem stereotyped: the husband is a successful, hardworking outsider who seems out of place in these surroundings and who is clearly perceived as Asian and as a threat; his Asian wife becomes an object of sexual desire. Gorden's description of Helen, however, is almost positive, albeit sexist. His affection for her seems honest, even though his main reason for starting the affair was to hurt his boss. As far as I know, this is the only Korean American novel in which neither the narrator nor the main characters are Korean.

c) **Over the Shoulder**

*Over the Shoulder* is a true mystery novel, the first Korean American one to my knowledge. Allen Choice is Korean American by birth, but his only "Korean" characteristic is that he knows Taekwon-Do. He works in personal protection and leads a life filled with so much routine that it is practically clinical – he works, goes to the gym, and then returns to his small apartment. He has no friends and, so it seems, no family. One day, his partner Paul is killed on the job. With the help of a young journalist, who is trying to uncover "the" story, Allen starts investigating Paul's death and accidentally encounters his own past and Korean background. A company for which Allen's father had worked as a driver is involved in Paul's death. By chance, Allen learns more about his father's death, and he recalls more and more of his own past. His father, in what is a "typical" Korean immigrant story, came to the United States as a graduate from one of Korea's top universities. His original intention was to go to medical school, but there was never enough money, and thus he started working at a forwarding company. Allen's mother died when he was born, and his only other relative besides his father was his father's sister, aunt Insook, a strict woman with whom he never got along. After his father died, Allen lived at her house.
Insook wants Allen to go to college and to study medicine, as his father always wanted him to, but Allen flees from her overwhelming pressure and ironfisted attitude and starts a new life without her. While investigating Paul's death, pieces of memory from his time with his father and with his aunt emerge: he remembers a hardworking man who spent little time with his son and ate cornflakes and take-out food with him in front of the TV. He recalls fights between his father and aunt in Korean, a language he never learned. He remembers the sound of the language, but does not understand it. Otherwise, Korean food and a few old photos from Korea showing people he does not know are the only things Korean with which he has contact while growing up. Since his father and aunt flew from North Korea, he has no connection to any relatives in Korea or a "homeland" in general. While looking into Paul's death, Allen meets Insook again for the first time in many years. He also gets to know friends and acquaintances of his father, and slowly a new image of his father forms in his mind that does not really correspond with his memories. Allen changes both from his struggle with the past and the knowledge he gains from it. In the end, he is no longer a man without family or past, no longer the flat and sterile character he used to be in the beginning. Instead, he seems more lively and open for relationships with others.

Korea is only mentioned in the novel as a country far away. The Korean characters are as sketchy and vague as the Americans, a typical trait in the genre of the mystery novel. Language and food, ethnic markers that often play important roles in ethnic literatures, are not important. On the contrary: their absence is almost striking. The novel reflects the protagonist's attitude towards his ethnicity. Allen considers his Korean background accidental; Korea is not a homeland for him. The memory of his parents is his only real link to Korean culture. His relationship to his ethnic background is factual and unsentimental; he is an "accidental Asian." Allen almost

206 The Accidental Asian is the autobiography of Eric Liu, journalist and former speechwriter for Bill Clinton. Liu wrote it at the age of 28 or 29 years and in it discusses questions of ethnic belonging and identity on the basis of his own biography. The book caused a great controversy upon its publication since Liu in it holds
seems to ignore the fact that he is Asian. Apart from occasional discriminatory moments and racist comments addressed to him, and his observation that he always seems to be the only Asian at gatherings and parties, being Asian seems to be without consequence and meaning for him. Even though at the end of the novel there is no sentimental reunion between the protagonist and his "roots," his attempt of coming to terms with his past was helpful for Allen.

d) Shared Themes in the Works of Leonard Chang
Chang's novels all express one basic similarity, namely a depiction of Korean Americans different from the way they are described in other works. The characters often seem less strange or foreign to the reader because they come without history and culture and thus fit into all kinds of (ethnic) backgrounds. There are only very few features that distinguish them or make them stand out.

His protagonists - Tom Pak, the nameless narrator in *Dispatches from the Cold*, and Allen Choice - are men without families. Their lives are lonely and empty, their jobs meaningless. All three are without friends, but in all three cases a woman enters the plot who ends up helping them. It is the women, however, who initiate contact in the novels: June, the daughter of the Rhees, is interested in Tom and starts an affair with him; the narrator of *Dispatches* is approached by Marlene, a waitress who works in the same diner as he. In both cases, the relationship is more of a sexual nature and is not affectionate. Allen Choice falls in love with the journalist Linda Maldonado, who at first intrudes into his life against his wishes, but then ends up being his only ally. Only in this case, is there reason to believe the protagonist's isolation is ended by a relationship to a woman.

It is also worth mentioning that Pak as well as Choice dropped out of college to earn their money with jobs that they just stumbled upon. The narrator from the opinion that the American dream can become true for everyone. The fact that he is not just an ordinary immigrant from China but stems from a very privileged background, does not really matter for him. Even though the book has been classified as the work of an "East-coast Asian" it is interesting to read because of its controversial tone.
Dispatches has finished his studies (he is a teacher), but at the time the novel is set, he is not working in his profession. This lets the three characters seem even more unconventional, even less part of a social fabric.

Both Tom Pak and Allen Choice do not speak any Korean and both have lost their father and mother. They have learned little about Korean culture, and in both cases they had negative encounters with Korea that left them uninspired for the usual "looking for one's roots." They thus only look Korean, but are not rooted in Korean culture, and they certainly do not identify with Koreanness. Allen Choice's name does not even sound Korean anymore, the original surname "Choi" being thoroughly Anglicized. Without any ethnic signifiers both characters might as well be white or another color. Similarly, the narrator from Dispatches might be of another ethnicity and could very well be white. All we know is that his parents adopted him. It seems that Leonard Chang is playing with different hues of ethnicity in his works. He does not go as far as Toni Morrison in her short story "Recitatif" but he plays a similar game. Chang says that he creates such characters because their kind was missing in other books. This can be easily acknowledged considering their difference to other Korean American characters.

Chang-rae Lee's Henry Park in Native Speaker is the only Korean American character who comes close to Leonard Chang's in that he, too, is a loner. He is, however, much more Korean than they are because he still has strong feelings for his dead parents and is concerned about his ethnicity. Except for this one superficial similarity, Chang's characters cannot be compared to other characters in Korean

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207 Tom Pak had to spend some time with his grandmother in Korea and Allen Choice grew up at his Korean aunt's house.

208 Morrison's only short story "was an experiment in the removal of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial." Toni Morrison, preface, Playing in the Dark. Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1990) xi.


209 "...I want to read about Korean Americans, and when I can't find the book that fulfills this desire, I write it." Jinee Kim, "Voice of a New Generation of Korean Americans: An Interview with Novelist Leonard Chang," *Korean Culture* (Fall 2001), internet:
American or Asian American writing: questions of identity or belonging are not raised by them, even though they do not belong anywhere, and ethnic markers are almost entirely absent. Leonard Chang’s works are thus very different from both other Korean American works and the Asian American classics, but that does not mean that his novels are apolitical: discrimination and racism are still an issue and quite clearly shown, albeit in another, more indirect way.

4. From Literature to Art

The works described above constitute but a small fraction of Korean American literature. There is much more and the amount is growing. The diversity of the population of Korean America is reflected in the various literary styles and themes that can be found. They range from classical autobiographies to the experimental works of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and the complex poetry of Myung Mi Kim, to bestselling novels such as the works of Chang-rae Lee and Nora Okja Keller, which I have discussed above. The many children's books should not be forgotten, and of course there are the great Lesbian novels by Willyce Kim. Also interesting

http://home.earthlink.net/~leonardchang123/koreanculture.html.


Myung Mi Kim so far has written several small volumes of poetry:
Myung Mi Kim, *Dura* (Los Angeles, Sun & Moon, 1998).

While ethnicity does not play an important role in Willyce Kim's novels, it is stressed very much in the many Korean children books. Very often, Korean history is used as a backdrop for the stories.

Willyce Kim, *Dead Heat* (Boston: Alyson, 1988). Willyce Kim has also written poetry.

A selection of Korean American literature for children/young adults:
regarding questions of identity and belonging is the little-explored but growing category of Korean American literature by Korean American adoptees. Korea, especially since the Korean War, has been and still is a great exporter of orphaned and "unwanted" children. Most of them are adopted by families outside Korea, transracially, and often end up in not very ethnically diverse areas, which poses a peculiar situation to grow up in.\(^\text{212}\)

Korean American art is thriving almost as well as the literature. Famous names are Michael Joo, Ik-Joong Kang, Nikki S. Lee, Y. David Chung, and Byron Kim, to name but a few. In the following chapter, I would like to deal with a few artists whom I find particularly interesting regarding the concepts of identity and belonging. They are Yong Soon Min, Young Chung, Jean Shin, and Kyungmi Shin.\(^\text{213}\)

So far, several exhibitions have dealt with Asian American art and/or Korean American art. An early exhibition that featured Asian Americans, among artists of other ethnicities, even made it to Europe. It was *Mistaken Identities* (1993). *Across the Pacific: Contemporary Korean and Korean American Art* at the Queens Museum of Art, Queens, New York 1993/94, followed it. *Across the Pacific* was also shown in Korea. Throughout the years 1994-1996 *Asia/America. Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art* was shown at several places in the United States. *Who's afraid of Freedom. Korean-American Artists in California*, at the Newport Harbor Art Museum in Newport Beach took place in 1996, *Scene '97. Contemporary Korean American Artists* at the Korean

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\(^{213}\) I deliberately leave out Nam June Paik, since his work has been already discussed widely. Besides, it is hard to ascribe Paik to one country, that is, to call him, for example, "Korean American" because he is too cosmopolitan to be claimed by one nation. His art has been labeled Korean, German, and American all at once. It is probably all of these. A study looking the importance of questions of belonging and identity in his works would certainly be interesting as well, but would require an entirely new book.
American Museum in Los Angeles in 1997. A well-curated show presented only in Korea was Koreamericakorea at the Artsonje Center in Seoul, 2000. The 2002 Kwangju Biennale will have a special exhibition of Korean diasporic art that will also include works by Korean American artists.

Books that deal with Asian American art are still quite rare. Next to the essays that can be found in the catalogues accompanying the exhibitions above, I was able to find only a few more anthologized texts. A nice collection of essays and exhibition reviews is Alice Yang's Why Asia? (1998) Lucy R. Lippard's Mixed Blessings (1990) is one of the first books written by an art historian that deals, among other things, with Asian American art. Talking Visions (1998), edited by Ella Shohat, has essays about Asian American art as well.

D. Korean American Art

Especially in the works of artists of color, questions of identity, representation, and misrepresentation are important issues. It comes as no surprise that many artists try to deal with these questions on a personal, sometimes even autobiographical basis. It is, however, wrong to assume that their works therefore are not of general importance or interest, that in these works content is more important than aesthetics, or that works by artists of one ethnic group are all very much alike since the experience of immigration that supposedly leads to a "fractured" identity within one

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214 The catalogues are:
Koreamericakorea, curators David Ross and Sun-Jung Kim (Seoul: Artsonje Center, 2000).
In order to show the wide thematic range found in Korean American art, I have selected works by four artists who identify themselves as Korean Americans. As with the literary works, my selection is by no means representative, and concentrates instead on works particularly reflecting the question of identity. There are many additional artists who would be interesting to examine, but a larger study of Asian American/Korean American work yet has to be written.

In the works of Jean Shin, Young Chung, and Yong Soon Min I have placed special attention on the way the artist's own bodies are used. It ranges from the tangible absence of the body and issues of identity in Jean Shin's pieces and a playful dealing with identity and the artist's body in Young Chung's works, to the political art of Yong Soon Min in which identity and belonging play an important role. While Jean Shin cannot be seen in her works, Young Chung appears in some of his, and Yong Soon Min is present in almost all of her pieces. It seems that the more important the role of identity in the works of the artists is, the more prominent a role the own body plays. I have also chosen briefly to introduce Kyungmi Shin, whose works do not deal with issues of identity or belonging at all. Their topics are of a universal and not specifically Korean American nature.

1. Identity and the Self: Jean Shin, Young Chung, Yong Soon Min, and Kyungmi Shin

a) Jean Shin
Jean Shin works mainly with found objects, which she transforms into "new cultural artifacts." In her works, we almost painfully feel the absence of life and of the human body. She is "particularly interested in using the fabric from clothes because of its relationship to the body," but explicitly leaves out the body itself. *Alterations* (1997-98, plates 1 & 2) consists of pant scraps she has fixated with wax. Although
cut off and discarded by owners who had their pants altered, they still are a reminder of these people. Almost memorial-like, Alterations reminds us of life although it is obviously not present. Similarly, the Untitled piece consisting of nylons and thread makes the presence/absence of their former owners perceptible, even though they are transformed into new objects, removed from their former function and the women who wore them (plates 3 & 4).

Likewise bodiless, but even closer to the body than clothes, are the materials used in Nest and the Hair Drawings (all 1998, plates 5-10). In the hair drawings, Shin uses strands of her own hair. The images resemble calligraphy drawings. Even more than (used) clothes, cut-off hair reminds the viewer of the person to whom it once belonged. Shin states that hair "serves as a metaphor for growth, decay, and memory." She asserts that working with her hair instead of traditional materials (ink, pencil) makes the drawings "more intimate and meaningful." The presence of the artist can be felt in her very absence and this becomes even more evident in Nest. Nest is a piece constructed with human hair and human teeth (specifically wisdom teeth) (plate 11).

There is a close relation between Shin's works with used and discarded clothes and these "hair pieces." They all address the presence/absence of life. I see an intensification of the absence and presence of the intimate and personal in these three different works/series of works: while the pant scraps in Alterations probably have been in contact with the human body only once, the nylons were, similar to a "second skin," worn extremely close to the body. The "hair pieces" then are the logical next step since the material used was not only close to the body but indeed part of the body before it was transformed. Moreover, the "hair pieces" consist of disposable parts of the artist's own body, making these works even more personal.

b) Young Chung
Young Chung's work is very diverse, and he often uses subtlety and humor as stylistic
devices. He does not present himself in all of his photographs, but often we can nevertheless feel his presence through the way he takes his pictures.

*Life Line* (1995) is a series of photos (plates 12-15). On each photo, we see one person in his or her everyday surroundings. Time seems to have come to a standstill for a moment on these photos, all movement is frozen and the atmosphere almost surreal. The people on them seem lost in thought, as if they have their mind on something other than the activity they are busy with at the moment. We see, for example, a crouching woman, watering plants with a hose, a girl sitting on the floor of her room, a young woman behind the counter of a beauty parlor, talking on the phone, an old woman standing with a fly swatter in a big, American kitchen. None of the individuals looks directly into the camera; they all seem somehow indifferent. Almost invisible to the eye, a thin thread is attached to one of the arms of each person. The thread leads outside the picture; this is the lifeline. All of the people in the pictures are Korean Americans. This is not necessarily evident to the viewer; the viewer, however, does realize that the people are Asians in an American surrounding. Being lost in thought, suddenly pausing in their daily routine, has something scary about it. It seems to be a momentary questioning of their situation or their lives, of their displacement. The lifeline, which actually seems more like a silk thread than a solid line, is their only link to the "real" life. It appears as though, if one pulled the line, they would wake up and continue whatever they were previously doing. Moreover, the "alienation effect" that is reached by freezing all movement draws the viewer into the images. Observers have a much closer look at these people who are strangers. Automatically, they start to make up stories about what might be going on in the minds of the depicted.

This very poetic work by Young Chung, done while he was still a student, is one of his few works in which Korean Americans are shown, in which Korean America is an issue. Chung considers himself a Korean American artist. He believes, however, like many other artists of color, that his ethnic background does not have to
be reflected in all of his works and that he and his art are about many other things as well. For me, Life Line is Chung's attempt to come to terms with his surrounding, his family, and his background, and as such has a very intimate character. The people in the pictures might as well be part of his life line.

Personal aspects can also be recognized in those works by Chung that deal with the issue of identity. On some of the images, Chung himself can be seen: in one of his works he poses as a plane, another is a self-portrait of the artist in the fashion of the covers of the British magazine i-D (plates 16 & 17).

Most of Young Chung's photographs deal with self-proclamations and self-identifications that are simultaneously affirmed and questioned. I am Young Chung (1998) is a spoof of Nike's "I am Tiger Woods"-campaign (plate 18). The girl wearing the t-shirt of course is not Young Chung. By voluntarily putting wrong "labels" on people, by placing them within a context where they do not really belong, he humorously reveals "the limits of representations, the impermanence and slippage of identity and the importance of play in the construction of identity, the self and community."

In a series of "mothers" (1998), in which the subjects are actually flight attendants, Chung plays with the term "mother" and all of its implications, imposed and real, with an eye on ethnicity and gender. The artist who by the very perspective he chose for these photos (looking up to a smiling, caring face) turns into the one who is "mothered," becomes, even though invisible to the eye, part of the picture. At the same time, it is the spectator who is drawn into the photos, challenged to rethink the term "mother" (plates 19 & 20).

Young Chung's current work includes one series about "a boy and his dog," picking up a popular motif of American popular culture (for example, Lassie) and another

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219 Young Chung. E-mail to the author. 30 May 1999.
series using American vermin traps that come in the most amazing shapes.  

**c) Yong Soon Min**

Like Young Chung, Yong Soon Min belongs to the "1.5 generation." While Chung was born the 1970s, Min, who was born in the 1950s, defines herself as "child of the cold war." She is more involved in history and the division of Korea and has a different approach towards questions of identity and the self than he has. Since Min often intertwines political and personal issues, it comes as no surprise that she herself can be found in many of her works.

Min is probably the best-known Korean American artist. She received, among other things, a Bellagio Residency of the Rockefeller Foundation (1997) and an award from the National Endowment for the Arts (1989-90). Min is also working as a curator and is professor for fine arts at the University of California at Irvine.

Min was born in Korea and immigrated as a child to the United States, where she was educated. She now lives in Los Angeles. Elaine Kim writes about Min's work *Bridge of No Return*:

Her symbolic recontextualization of the two Koreas allows counter-memories and counter-history to emerge. The U.S. is profoundly implicated in these, since *Bridge of No Return* presents three positions, all "belonging" to the U.S.: the diasporic Korean American positions, which because of racism is in but not of the U.S.; the postcolonial South Korean position, which because of a half-century of U.S. military and economic intervention as well as its powerful cultural influence, is of but not in the U.S.; and the subaltern North Korean position, which is neither in or of the West but has been "problematically constructed by the U.S." Almost all of what Kim describes in this short paragraph can be said about Min's larger corpus of works as well. Min herself describes her works as follows:

Since the mid-eighties my diverse body of work has been regarded within the

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220 Personal conversation with Young Chung, Los Angeles, April 2000.
221 She regularly curates shows for the Korean American Museum (KAM) in Los Angeles, and in 2002 is one of the curators for the acclaimed Kwangju Bienale in Korea.
222 Elaine H. Kim, "On Yong Soon Min's *Bridge of No Return*," *Yong Soon Min*, curator Don Desmett (Champaign: Krannert Art Museum, 1997) 5.
rubric of identity art. Much of it deals with the intersections of history and memory, as well as the politics of representation. My installations and sculptures often employ narrative strategies that address issues of cross-cultural translation inherent within certain "isms," such as feminisms or nationalisms. In this respect, my work foregrounds questions of positionality -... the relationships between the center and the periphery within a postcolonial critique. A positioning that is both claimed and put in tension with a position that's ascribed.  

It is, therefore, more than fitting to deal with her works in the context of identity and belonging and the construction of identity narratives. In the following, a selection of works by Min will be looked at more closely.

**Defining Moments**

In *Defining Moments* (1996), a series of six black and white photographs, Min draws a connection between important Korean / Korean American historical events and her own life (plates 21-27). The first photograph is a negative and shows Min's abdomen and arms. "Occupied" is written on one of the arms, "territory" on the other. In a spiral, starting at her navel, four dates are written: 1953; April 19, 1960; May 18, 1980; and April 29, 1992. The meaning of these dates is explained by Min on the last picture with a text:

**Defining Moments**

1953 – End of the Korean War, year of my birth; 4/19/60 – witnessed this popular uprising which toppled the Syngman Rhee government and emigrated later that year to the U.S.; 5/18/80 – the Kwangju uprising and massacre indelibly politicized me; 4/29/92 – watched LA burn on my birthday; ______ - we stand together on Mt. Paektu overlooking our Lake of Heaven.

There are two ways in which the writings on Min's body and head are meant to be read: one level refers to Min as a person, the other to the country Korea. In this

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224 This text is placed at the end of the series of photos and is thus meant to be read after viewing the images. To make the explanations easier, I have chosen to present them earlier.
double reading, "occupied territory" would then point to, on one hand, South Korea as a country "occupied" by U.S. military since the end of the Korean War in 1953. Many Koreans find the continuing presence of U.S. soldiers in South Korea and the strong political, economic, and cultural influence of the U.S. on their country disturbing. The separation of the country into North and South Korea, as well as the fact that unification has not yet happened is often explained by the strong ties between the South Korean and the American governments. On the other hand, "occupied territory" also signifies the person Min, the woman, the Korean American, as all these categories are occupied by certain meanings and prejudices. The dates on her body also indicate these two levels of the political and the personal and are explained in the images to come.

The next five images show Min's upper body and head, with "heartland" written across her chest and "DMZ," for demilitarized zone, on her forehead. On the personal level, these expressions can be read almost literally, on the political level they again refer to Korea whose heartland is cut in two by the DMZ, a stretch of land that separates the two Koreas along the 38th parallel. In each of the five photos that follow, different images are projected onto her. The first image shows soldiers, possibly American soldiers, in rice fields and refers to the first date on Min's body, 1953, the end of the Korean War and, at the same time, as we later learn in the accompanying text, the year of Min's birth. The second image, projected onto her and covering Min's features almost entirely, seems to be a photo taken during a demonstration. This image corresponds to the second date on Min's belly: April 19, 1960. The student demonstrations in South Korea started on this day. The student movement, also called sa-il-gu, after the date on which it began, resulted in the

\[225\] During his visit to South Korea, President Bush generated great protest when he called North Korea a part of the "axis of evil," because such remarks hinder the improvement of the relations between the two Koreas. Of course, the North Korean government is also promoting the idea that the presence and involvement of the U.S. in South Korea renders unification impossible. One of North Korean leader Kim Jong Il's preconditions for unification is the withdrawal of all U.S. troops from South Korean territory.

\[226\] "Sa-il-gu" is Korean and means "4-1-9," or April 19th.
overthrow of the autocratic Rhee government. In Korea this uprising is still seen as a symbol for the power of the people in the fight for democracy. In the text, Min explains that she closely observed the student movement and that 1960 was also the year she emigrated to the United States. The third photo again shows soldiers, this time, however, Korean soldiers, running on a street. From the date belonging to this picture (18 May 1980), we can recognize that it was taken during the unrest in the South Korean town of Kwangju. In the demonstrations against the coup d'état of General Chun Doo Hwan, Korean special forces killed hundreds or even thousands of people. Because of the high number of casualties, the event is often referred to as the Kwangju massacre. As with many other people, the massacre made a deep impression on Min. With the fourth photo, Min leaves Korea and moves on to show Los Angeles in April 1992. Projected onto Min are newspaper clippings reporting on the riots in Los Angeles's Koreatown which occurred in the wake of the verdict in the Rodney King case and which left dozens of Korean-owned stores burned and looted. Next to the great financial losses, their depiction as perpetual strangers and scapegoats by the media, and above all the fact that they did not receive help or moral support from other Americans, traumatized many Korean Americans across the country. Significantly, the upheavals are called sa-i-gu (4-2-9, April 29th), after the manner of naming other important events in Korean history (such as, for example, sa-il-gu or yook-i-o, 6-2-5 June 25th 1950, beginning of the Korean War.) April 29th, we learn, is also Min's birthday. The last photo reveals many of Min's features and, in contrast to the crowded and troubled images that preceded it, reflects a peaceful atmosphere. It is a photo of Mount Paektu, located in the north of the Korean peninsula.

No date is attached to the last image because the event described in it has not

227 The exact number of people who died in Kwangju is not known. The Korean government claimed that "only" a couple of hundred people died; eyewitnesses and investigations undertaken at a later point of time came to the conclusion that there must have been thousands killed. Bruce Cumings, Korea's Place in the Sun. A Modern History (1997. New York: Norton, 1998) 378.

228 For more information on sa-i-gu and the Rodney King case, see the section on the Los Angeles riots.
yet taken place and is only bound to happen after considerable political changes in both Koreas. For Paektusan, or White Head Mountain, is located in North Korea, at the contemporary Sino-Korean border, and is therefore almost inaccessible to South Koreans and most citizens from non-communist countries. The "Lake of Heaven," Ch'onji, is a beautiful, crystal-pure volcanic lake at its summit. An actual meeting there would only be possible after reunification. Min's wish for reunification can be easily detected: she speaks of "we" and "our lake of heaven." It is not clear whom she means. On the personal level it could be a close friend or a member of her family. On the political level, the "we" could refer to North and South Korea. The fact that Min chose Paektusan as meeting point corresponds with this idea: Paektusan is the mythical birthplace of the Korean people and therefore of all Koreans, both, South and North.229

The sequence in which the pictures are viewed is important: first, one sees Min's body with the dates written on it, then the pictures with the projections onto her head and upper body. People who are well acquainted with Korean history can recognize or guess which events are depicted in the projections. Their assumptions are confirmed by the dates. For viewers who do not associate anything with the projections or dates, the text explains what is necessary to know. For both groups of viewers, the text additionally explains the personal level, which cannot be understood solely through the pictures and dates.

Japanese occupation, the Korean War, the division of Korea and its people, U.S. military presence in Korea, student demonstrations, Kwangju, sa-i-gu – all of the events Min refers to – are considered crucial elements of Korean history and as such are part of a collective Korean and Korean American memory. As is often the case in Min's works, her intention in Defining Moments is not only to depict important political and historical events, but also to connect these with the personal level, following the

229 Cumings 22.
feminist motto that "the personal is the political." Laying emphasis on the female perspective of politics and history is important for Min. In *Defining Moments*, she intertwines history with her personal history; she describes how she, as an American of Korean origin, has been shaped by history. She positions herself in the tide of history, showing clearly that she took part in history, and that history is also a part of her: she has history written and projected onto her naked, female body – she "embodies" history. She uses history in order to define herself, but by showing history from her personal perspective, she also opens up a new view on it. The *Defining Moments* she describes are not only important personal, but also historical moments. A viewer who is familiar with history comes to know an additional personal aspect of it; the viewer to whom Korean (American) history was previously unknown comes to know it together with Min's own story.

Asserting her place in history is for Min a way to find an alternative "home." The meaning of "home" needs to be redefined, since for many people with an immigrant background it often cannot be an actual place, and for Min, dealing with history is certainly a way to address this problem. She often quotes from Ko Won's poem "Home" to describe this difficult situation: "To us, already, / a birthplace is / no longer a home./ The place we were brought up is not either./ Our history, rushing to us/ Through fields and hills, is our home...."

**Talking Herstory**

A similar approach to history and the self can be found in *Talking Herstory* (1990), which is relatively well-known since it adorns the cover of Lisa Lowe's *Immigrant Acts* (plate 28). Here, we see Min's head on the bottom of the image. From her open mouth grows something that reminds us of branches on a tree, with photographs hanging from them. The branches are actually made out of pieces of the Korean map.

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231 For example in *Art to Art.*
The photos seem to be old, private snapshots from Korea. Lying under these pictures, and the histories represented by them, are photographs of politicians from the U.S. and U.S.S.R. in relation to Korea. Again, we see private history, i.e. the history of the woman Yong Soon Min, as a part of public, or even world history and vice versa.

*Mother Load*

Another piece of art by Yong Soon Min, *Mother Load* (1996), faces similar issues as *Defining Moments*, but also adds some historical events that she did not touch upon in the earlier work. *Mother Load* (plate 29) consists of four *pojagi*, traditional Korean wrapping cloths that are generally used for transporting or storing personal belongings. Making *pojagi* is similar to quilting: patches of leftover fabric are artistically sewn together. Similarly to quilting, making *pojagi* has evolved from a necessity into an art form. Next to the *pojagi* that are for everyday use and made out of scraps of cloth, there are artistically designed ones, often made out of fine materials. The latter are more often hung on walls than actually used. Their patterns are often especially extravagant and elaborate. The "simpler" ones, however, can be very pretty and carefully designed as well. In *Mother Load*, Min thus uses *pojagi* as a medium, an object that is traditionally part of women's lives because only women make and use them.

The first *pojagi* (plate 30) is printed with photographs from Korea's period as a Japanese colony. The material she uses for the cloth is delicate and almost transparent. Photographs of different sizes are used in place of leftover pieces of cloth. Most of them are well-known documentary images and are part of the collective memory of most people of Korean origin. They evoke similar connotations in people who are familiar with them; viewers who have never seen them before become curious because they recognize that they are meaningful. One

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of the photos, for example, shows the former Capitol building, one of the main symbols of the Japanese colonial power. It was erected in Seoul in 1926 by the Japanese and intentionally built so that it would bar the view to the throne hall of Kyongbok-kung Palace that was once the focus of Korean royal power. Another shows a schoolchild learning Japanese characters; Korean language and writing were banned from schools and public life during the Japanese colonial period. Instead, Koreans had to learn Japanese and even take on Japanese names. The second pojagi (plate 31) contains a traditional Korean dress, a hanbok, in camouflage patterns. This combination of a female piece of clothes with a pattern usually associated with war and soldiers is stark. This pojagi refers to the role of Korean women during war: their bodies were often "militarized" and "colonized" as they suffered rape, prostituted themselves, or endured general hardships during war. This misery includes that of the "comfort women" of colonial Korea and the many Korean women who, during and after the Korean War, worked as prostitutes near the American military bases because they had to support themselves and their families or were hoping for a better life outside Korea. The outside of the pojagi is made out of the same camouflage material as the hanbok, and a line out of the same material diagonally divides its inside. One half of it is lined in red, the other in blue. These colors are found in the South Korean flag, but here they refer to the division of Korea because, unlike the soft wave-like line in the flag, the straight and precise line between the two colors resembles the 38th parallel dividing the two Koreas since the war. The third pojagi

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233 In order to underline the symbolic meaning of the building we should recall that the Capitol building itself was constructed in the shape of the Chinese ideograph for "Japan." After the colonial period, it accommodated the Korean national museum. On the 50th anniversary of the liberation from Japan in 1995, the dismantling of the building began; today it no longer exists.

(plate 32) is a large scarf. Ordinary scarves are often used in the same way as *pojagi*. The scarf is simple, without any patterns, and appears quite modern. The female underwear spread out upon it in order perhaps to be wrapped in it later seems to be contemporary, too. Each piece, however, is cut in half. This, again, reminds us of the division of Korea, but now explicitly referring to modern Korea where the division of the country is still objected passionately. The fact that the clothes are Min's own again brings in both personal and Korean American aspects. It refers to the sense of separation and displacement that might be felt by Korean émigrés. The last *pojagi* (plate 33) is bundled, showing an example of a *pojagi* in use. It is hard to see what it contains, and it is hard to make out what is printed on it because this time the cloth is not spread out. It has – in contrast to the others – something immediate about it because it is already bundled; it seems ready to be picked up any minute to be taken away by the owner. It contains the other half of the clothing from the third *pojagi*, and photos from Min's personal collection. Similar to the first one, photos are again printed on the fabric in order to produce the *pojagi*-patchwork. This time, however, the photos were taken in the United States and reveal Korean American issues. On one photo, for example, a demonstration against the alleged U.S.-involvement in the Kwangju massacre of May 1980 can be recognized.\footnote{It is a widespread assumption that the U.S. government backed the coup d'état of General Chun Doo Hwan.} The Kwangju rebellion and massacre are still commemorated by many Koreans and Korean Americans. Other pictures were taken during the Los Angeles riots of 1992, as already mentioned, the most important event in Korean American history.\footnote{For explanation of the importance of *sa-i-gu* to Korean American communities in the U.S. see, for example, Elaine Kim, "Home Is Where the Han Is: A Korean American Perspective on the Los Angeles Upheavals," *Reading Rodney King / Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams (New York: Routledge, 1993) 215-35.}

*Pojagi* are usually used to transport or store personal belongings. In *Mother Load*, Min makes *pojagi* out of history and, at the same time, uses them as vessels to transport and store history. By using objects that are usually made and used by
women as a medium for her messages, Min reflects on a female reading of history. She uses cloth, a dress, female underwear – all things that are very close to the body – to describe the direct influence of history on women, an aspect often neglected in the traditional readings of history. Due to the way the *pojagi* are presented – lying next to each other on a pedestal – they seem like a body of evidence. It proves that women, too, have been there, have seen and lived history, have had influence on and were influenced by what happened, and that they remember. The last, bundled cloth, the one appearing to await being retrieved, symbolizes the influence of contemporary history and events on the life and consciousness of people, in this case on the life and consciousness of the artist herself. Again, Min intertwines the personal and the political, the intimate and the historical, in order to show the full extent and meaning of history.

**Kindred Distance**

In *Defining Moments* and *Talking Herstory* Min works with her own images and incorporates herself into her works. In *Mother Load*, her image is not present, but her personal belongings are still there to be seen. In another work of hers, *Kindred Distance* (1996), Min is completely absent from the images (plates 34-37). The pictures are photographs she has taken during a visit to the border between North and South Korea. Even though we do not see Min in the pictures, we clearly feel her presence. As Elaine Kim points out, in the pictures we see South Koreans staring at puppets that supposedly look like North Koreans, but we also have Min, the Korean American, staring at the South Koreans through her camera. The letters printed on the two photos read "where" and "are we home," respectively, with "are we home" written phonetically in Korean letters but without particular meaning in the Korean language. The work confronts issues of belonging and home on multiple levels, giving no concrete answer to the question posed in the writing on the photos.
In her extensive body of works, Min has deepened many of the aspects I have discussed above. For example, *Bridge of No Return* (1997) and *DMZ XING* (1994) deal with the separation of the two Koreas, *Ritual Labor of a Mechanical Bride* (1993) with feminist issues and *Dwelling (Remembering Jungsbindae)* (1992) with comfort women.

*Kimchi Xtravaganza*! and *Memory Matters* are an exhibition and an art project created by Yong Soon Min. They are especially interesting because they connect everyday life with art by using food as a vehicle. Food and eating are intriguing motifs in literature and art because, especially in the ethnic literatures, they carry much meaning.

**Kimchi Xtravaganza!**

If one would ask a Korean or a connoisseur of Korean food what the most important component of Korean food is, the answer is certainly Kimchi, right after the basic component rice. There are different kinds of kimchi: pickled Chinese cabbage, cucumbers, or radish. It is always very hot, since the main spices are a lot of red chili powder, garlic, and spring onions. Kimchi is eaten with every meal, for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. The reactions to kimchi range from addiction to disgust because of its strong smell and the spicy taste. In any case, the reaction is never indifferent. Kimchi is certainly also a food that makes integration and assimilation difficult, since after eating it one automatically smells of garlic. Due to its strong smell, non-kimchi eaters do not appreciate the storage of kimchi in refrigerators.

Kimchi's importance extends beyond its raw ingredients, since the cook, her creativity and her taste, as well as the region she comes from and her style in kimchi-making in general, even her social class are significant. Kimchi is usually

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237 There are many different ways of writing "kimchi" in English. I have decided to stick with this popular way of spelling the word. Similarly, in order not to cause confusion, I have kept the spelling of Korean words as they are used in the works I am analysing instead of using the system of transcribing Korean words into English recently introduced by the South Korean government. I have done so for practical reasons and am fully aware that in a different context the names would have to be spelled otherwise (examples: the town of Pusan nowadays is spelled Busan, Kwangju is Gwangju).

238 The elaborate preparation of Korean food was and very often still is a woman's job.
prepared without recipes – kimchi recipes are for beginners.

As a vital component of Korean cuisine, Kimchi accompanies Koreans wherever they emigrated to and often is still popular with the second immigrant generation as well. The supermarket shelves in Los Angeles's Koreatown are full of different kinds and brands of kimchi, and in other places in the United States it is not hard to come by either. Yong Soon Min, curator of *Kimchi Xtravaganza*, admits that the exhibition was born out of her own enthusiasm for kimchi: "I'm a kimchi lover through and through." She tells how in her family, as probably in many others, kimchi was mixed with American food: "Our meals were always hybrid: kimchi and other *panch'an* [side dishes] with the likes of Shake-and-Bake chicken or Chef Boyardee spaghetti or Campbell's minestrone soup, etc." She knew of some works of art that include kimchi and started to look for more. On her search, she found out something interesting: "In the course of working on these projects, I discovered that kimchi, like a prism, reflected a wide range of associative feelings and responses for both Koreans and non-Koreans. It seems to be both a wellspring and a touchstone for many about various notions and attitudes about Korea and Korean American identity." Her search resulted in an exhibition that was shown by the Korean American Museum (KAM) in Los Angeles in 1998: *Kimchi Xtravaganza*. The project, which is well documented in an exhibition catalogue, consisted of various works of art, as well as essays and poems about kimchi. Outside the museum, a sub-project with the name *Memory Matters* took place. It was the aim of the exhibition and the sub-project to give "a multidisciplinary examination of cultural icons and their relationship to memories and identities." The approach not only included the

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239 For a long time, this was not the case. There are many accounts of immigrants trying to make kimchi without being able to get the right ingredients, as well as, stories of Korean students suffering due to the unavailability of the food.


241 Min 5.

242 *Kimchi Xtravaganza* a multidisciplinary showcase about kimchi was curated by the Kimchi Committee chaired by Yong Soon Min and took place at the Korean American Museum (KAM), 6 June 1997 – 10 January 1998.
Korean communities but tried to incorporate the diversity of cultures found in Los Angeles. Consequently, not all of the 61 participating artists are Korean American, but have various ethnic backgrounds.\textsuperscript{244}

Ju Hui Judy Han sees three reoccurring topics in the exhibits, essays, and poems that deal with kimchi: "passion and desire, cultural transformation and integration, and narratives of family and identity."\textsuperscript{245} Of these three, I would like to pay special attention to the last one, and while doing so, concentrate on the public art project \textit{Memory Matters}.

\textit{Memory Matters}

\textit{Memory Matters} is an art project that was realized by Yong Soon Min and the anthropologist Soo-Young Chin. The strong feelings of many Koreans abroad, especially of the older generation, for their home country attracted Min's attention. She decided that she would like to document this strong link to the \textit{kohyang} (home country, hometown). For this, she chose only Koreans who originate from what is today North Korea, a group that currently is still quite large, but due to the overall age of the immigrants is growing smaller and smaller. For them the term \textit{kohyang} has an entirely different meaning than for immigrants from South Korea, because a return to their place of origin will most likely not be possible during their lifetime.

Min and Chin collected life stories of seven people from North Korea. The interviewees come from different social, professional, and regional backgrounds. The stories of their lives were, in a shortened form, each printed on leaflets, so that in the end there was a series of seven different leaflets. These were then folded and put in small, rectangular zip-loc bags. The bags were then attached to commercial kimchi jars, one at a time.\textsuperscript{246} The prepared jars were then sold in supermarkets as usual. The

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{243} Yong Soon Min (curator), \textit{Kimchi Xtravaganza!} (Los Angeles: KAM/Sinclair Printing Company, 1997).
\item \textsuperscript{244} Sharon A. Suh, Foreword, \textit{Kimchi Xtravaganza!} Yong Soon Min (curator), (Los Angeles: KAM/Sinclair Printing Company, 1997) 1.
\item \textsuperscript{245} Ju Hui Judy Han, Introduction, \textit{Kimchi Xtravaganza!} Yong Soon Min (curator), (Los Angeles: KAM/Sinclair Printing Company, 1997) 7.
\item \textsuperscript{246} Several kimchi companies agreed to participate.
\end{itemize}
project was targeted mainly at Korean Americans of the 1.5 and second generations and non-Koreans.

Even though the life stories differ greatly from each other, they have some things in common: all of the interviewees lived through the Japanese occupation of Korea and the Korean War. All of them fled Korea and then immigrated – via other countries or directly – to the United States. Next to the short versions of their life story, a few sentences can be found on what kimchi means to them. The life stories are all interesting and touching. They – on the smallest possible space – combine personal and "official" history and impart both.

Min's original plan was to attach the stories with stickers to the backsides of kimchi jars, but that was – due to technical problems – not possible. Either way, the form of the project recalls the banal things that can be found on the back of milk cartons or cornflakes boxes. Those stories find their way into the lives of their readers in passing, but they often manage to make a lasting impression. Min and Chin thus managed to bring awareness about the lives and past of Korean immigrants to an audience who might not know much about the issues which are constituent of Korean (American) history.

d) Kyungmi Shin
An artist who does not deal with history, identity, and belonging at all is Kyungmi Shin. She came to the United States as a student and has been living there ever since. She considers herself a Korean American artist, but does not deal with Korean American issues at all in her works. Her art is rather about issues that transcend nationalities and ethnicities; it focuses on human nature as such. Many of her works are about obsessions. She, for example, has made a series of candy bibles, in which she links the craving of people for religion, specifically Christianity, to the craving for sweets (plates 38 & 39). Both sustain, may be addictive, and, if consumed excessively, can do harm. Another series she has produced consists of a sequence of "wallpapers." Similar to "wallpapers" that can be found on computer desktops, they
each consist of one small photo, multiplied and put next to the other repeatedly and thus forming a pattern that as wallpaper is attached to the wall. Motifs for her wallpapers are, for example, Princess Diana's funeral, Mother Teresa's funeral, and Bob Dylan playing "Knockin' on Heaven's Door" for the Pope (plates 40-44). All of them are events that were widely covered by the media and that reached millions of people. The media coverage was huge and reflected people's attraction and hunger for such events. Turning the images into wallpapers, she imitates the way they surround people and invade their private homes. Shin has also created wallpapers with patterns out of fashion logos, again dealing with desire and obsession, this time of a different kind. Shin is one example of the many artists of color who do not deal with questions of identity at all.

And even among those artists for whom subjectivity does play a role, there are many different ways to deal with identity or with the self in art. In the cases discussed here, they vary. Several cases explore the explicit politicization and exhibition of the self, which forces the viewer to read history in different ways. Others play with different ideas of representation that challenge the viewer to question fixed concepts, encouraging an abstract confrontation with physical presence/absence. While still others engage ideas of the personal self that force us to deal with the ephemeral nature of being. Thus, even in addressing subjects that are traditionally classified as being "typical" for artists of color, mainly the question of identity, Shin, Chung, and Min show that their works are diverse with regard to content and aesthetic form.

Comparing the way identity and belonging are reflected in literature and art, one can say that the content, as well as, the forms are quite similar to each other, ranging from autobiographical and political to playful and humorous to abstract and universal.

An issue that reoccurs in both literature and art, is Korean (American) history. The following chapter will try to find reasons for the strong presence of history in Korean America.
2. History Present – The Role of Korean History in Contemporary Korean American Literature and Visual Arts

White man, hear me! History, as nearly no one seems to know, is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations.

- James Baldwin, "White Man's Guilt"
  (Ebony, August 1965)

An engagement with Korean history permeates much of Korean American cultural activity, as evidenced in both literature and visual arts. In an article about Korean American literature, Chung-Hei Yun writes: "The centrifugal force shaping the 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 World War II, the Korean War, and the post-1965 exodus." In her article, Yun deals with four older Korean American novels, but the very same issues still can be found in contemporary works.247 The intensity of the presence is even more striking in them, I would say, because writers and artists of the second or 1.5 generation have produced them. Neither those who were born in the United States, nor those who immigrated at a very young age have witnessed the historical events they confront, and yet they are as present in their works as in most of the literature and art of the first immigrant

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In the following, I would like to explore how historical Korean events are dealt with in contemporary Korean American works and why they are so present, since an analysis of recent fiction and art corroborates the privileging of this theme for Korean writers and artists. My thesis is that history in the Korean American context is used to construct identities and claim a Korean American space in the United States.

The importance of history in some of Yong Soon Min's works has been discussed above. Like in Min's works, in literature we often find the Korean American present intertwined with a Korean past. Nora Okja Keller's already mentioned first novel *Comfort Woman* is one good example for this. In this novel, Akiko's past as a "comfort woman" during the time of the Japanese occupation of Korea is crucial for an understanding of her personality and the relation to her daughter Beccah. Knowing about the past, however, also helps understand Beccah better; the importance of the past thus reaches out to the present.

The Korean War is made a crucial element of Susan Choi's *The Foreign Student*. Choi's novel is quite untypical for a contemporary Asian American novel in that it is a love story set in the American South of the 1950s – neither love stories nor the South can be easily found in Asian America. Chung Ahn arrives in Sewanee, Tennessee, straight from war-ridden Korea. There he attends college (he has received a small grant) and falls in love with the aging belle Katherine. In an interesting way, Choi intertwines scenes from the American South of the 1950s with Chung's nightmarish memories from wartime Korea. Choi is accurate with her historical details and describes many events and facts from Korean history that might not be known to the average reader, such as caves on Cheju Island where resistance fighters hid or certain troop movements. Whole pages are dedicated to the outlining

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of the historical situation and almost every event mentioned is linked to Chung's life – it almost seems as if he has to live through as many of the situations of the Korean War as possible. About the division of Korea, Choi writes:

In September 1945 John Hodge arrived in Korea with the Twenty-fourth Corps, to oversee the Japanese surrender. He expected to be going home soon. The Americans and the Soviets were splitting the job, by splitting the peninsula in half. A few American commanders, a map snapped out over a table, the heels of their hands planted on it. ...They chose the thirty-eighth parallel, latitude north. It was on everybody's map, and it fell just halfway, with the largest city, Seoul, on the south side. (63)

The factual person General John Reed Hodge becomes a fictional character. Chung later becomes military translator in one of the Hodge's units. Chung's memories of Korea clash with the reality in the United States, where everything seems to be so different. Even though Chung's and Katherine's worlds and histories are extremely different from each other, they become a couple and Chung continues living in the U.S. The novel is extraordinary because Choi manages to place the Korean issue of the Korean War and the division of the country into the American landscape of the South, to make the Asian war refugee and the Southern belle a couple, and thus intermingling two worlds.

Helie Lee's *Still Life With Rice* is quite different from the above works. It is told from the perspective of a 1.5-generation Korean American woman (Helie Lee), who returns to the place of her birth for a visit. One can say that she leaves for Korea as an American and returns as a Korean. The reason for this is that she discovers the life story of her grandmother, which in the course of the book is told in detail. The grandmother, Hongyong, lives through old Korea, the Japanese occupation, the Korean War, and post-war Korea. With enormous strength and will, Hongyong masters the most difficult situations and navigates through the most important events in recent Korean history. The book tells Hongyong's story along with Korean

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history and uses both to describe Koreans as a very special people with distinct qualities. The book's attitude is almost nationalistic. It ends with Hongyong as an old woman residing in the United States, reflecting on her son who in the turmoil of war was left in North Korea where he still lives, and on Korean unification:

Every morning and every night before I go to bed, I pray I will be able to hold my son in my tired arms ... I pray a lot, because praying is all I can do, and then I wait, hoping, aching, for the political gate that separates my son from me to fling open. And when it does, I will run in laughing and crying and singing out his name. How do I know? I am Korean, and we Koreans have this unshakable faith, for we are a strong-willed people. History proves it to be so. For more than a millennium we have lived as one people and I am certain we will be united again. Unification is possible! I say this as a woman who has survived over eighty years of living. (320)

With this, Lee makes a clear statement on how she views Korean people. She also touches on an event in Korean history that still is to happen, unification. Unification of the two Koreas is still an important emotional issue for many Koreans and Korean Americans, nationalist or not.

Interestingly, in none of the three books mentioned is ethnic identity a question. It is always clear that the main characters are Korean, and their ethnic identity is confirmed either by their own past or the past they learn about, which then becomes their own.

Chang-rae Lee's new novel A Gesture Life differs much from the previously discussed books. While his first book Native Speaker does not deal with Korean history at all, A Gesture Life touches on Korean history in a very peculiar way. The whole plot seems very constructed and it is as if Lee has intentionally built in certain elements that can frequently be found in other Korean American stories. At first sight, the novel does not seem to have visible Korean American elements at all: the

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protagonist is an old Japanese American, first generation, and he lives as a respected businessman in an affluent American small town. Slowly, however, Korean issues seep into the narrative, again by turning to the past. The reader learns that Doc Hata is in fact an ethnic Korean – there is a considerable Korean minority in Japan –, that he, as a young Japanese soldier, fell in love with a Korean comfort woman. He never forgave himself for not saving her. After he moved to the United States, he adopted a biracial Korean girl, who is probably the unwanted child of a Korean woman and an African American GI. It is a book with Korean issues (the ethnic Koreans in Japan, comfort women, adoption, biracial children of war) in which no common patterns are used. In the end, the reader knows almost everything about Doc Hata, but still cannot pin down his specific identity. In spite of all the details, or maybe even because of them, Hata appears more as a human being than a Japanese or Korean American.

The strong presence of history in these Korean American works is indisputable. It comes in different shapes and is used to serve different purposes. It is indeed remarkable that certain events in Korean history are mentioned repeatedly, regardless of the political and narrative intention of the author or artist. One explanation can be found in the fact that, as sociologist Stephen Cornell puts it, "narrative lies at the heart of many ethnic identities." Cornell argues that the narrative aspect of most ethnicities lies hidden, but breaks to the surface in times of rupture and uncertainty. Koreans have gone through many ruptures in their history and thus have had plenty of time and reasons to develop an identity narrative based on certain key moments of their history. Interestingly, this narrative has been taken over by young Korean Americans, who have made Japanese occupation, the division of the country, and the American involvement in Korean politics part of their stories and have added Korean American events such as sa-i-gu to this defining line.

Members of the second and 1.5 generation are usually more productive

251 Cornell 41.
culturally than those of the first, who often do not know the language well enough and are preoccupied with making a living in a new country. This second, more culturally productive generation has more difficulties in defining itself. Whereas the questions of homeland and culture are more or less clear to the first generation, the second has to redefine these issues. Historical facts or myths are made part of their narratives, so I would argue, to create or define Korean American identity. It seems natural that already existing identity narratives are used in searching for an identity. Diaspora, wounds of the past, and even trauma are uniting elements. Placing them in an American context gives them a new meaning. The narration of the same roots and the same history gives a feeling of belonging and unity as a group, and yet, the different U.S.-American contexts in which history is placed individualize the stories. Young Korean American writers and artists employ history to define themselves, to explain themselves, and eventually to claim their place in the United States. It is important to note that even though the same historical events are used to define what is "Korean American," there is not one particular Korean American identity, as some history-based, nationalistic literary and artistic productions promote. This can be easily seen by looking at the variety of Korean American productions. One does not necessarily need to know Korean history when reading or looking at Korean American works, but one inevitably becomes more familiar with it. History in Korean American works is not a mere decoration but rather a means to define and explain not only the Korean past, but also the American present.

And while Korean history is important to much Korean American literature and art, it is not the only source of inspiration, as can be seen in the very diverse Korean American cultural productions. Like all of Asian American literature, Korean American literature has undergone many changes and seen different trends, from immigrant biographies to abstract poetry. Identity and belonging are often made an issue, but again, it would be unfair to reduce Korean American works to these topics. Korean American art, as well as Asian American literature, no longer deals
exclusively with ethnicity and Korean/Asian American history but involves many other issues as well. They have, as a part of Asian America, been strongly influenced by the theoretical discussion going on in Asian American studies in general. Additionally, Korean American art and literature went through its own, unique development that is influenced by the distinct Korean American immigration history and – in many cases – by the strong presence of Korean (American) history.

A reason why identity is still an issue, even though not the main issue, of Asian American cultural production is probably the fact that discrimination and stereotyping of Asians are still common. The following chapter will deal with some current stereotypes.
VI. Current Stereotypes

Even though today the old stereotypes (Charlie Chan, Fu Manchu, etc.) have almost died out, stereotyping exists on a large scale. Current stereotypes are maybe even more dangerous since they are more subtle and therefore more difficult identify and abolish. Here, I will first discuss the model minority myth and then examine stereotyping during the Los Angeles riots of 1992.

A. The Model Minority Myth

The two most frequently discussed stereotypes and maybe the most dangerous ones are those of the "model minority" and the "inassimilable alien," the perpetual foreigner.

Almost all modern stereotypes of Asian Americans, with the possible exception of the Asian American gang member, are closely linked to the idea of a model minority. A model minority, in the American sense, is a group of non-white Americans who are hard-working and highly educated. They are very well assimilated, financially independent, and maybe even successful enough to make the American dream come true for them. The members of a model minority are supposed to stay invisible, i.e. not to cause any kind of trouble. The idea of a model minority, of course, also implies that there is a model majority, or in other words, that there is a certain standard set by the dominant culture that needs to be met by anyone who would like to be considered a member of the model minority. The danger lies exactly in this dependence on the dominant culture. It is this dominant culture that determines who belongs to the model minority and who does not. The dominant culture also condemns anybody who – according to its opinion – is not a model minority and therefore fits into the opposite category, the one of the "unassimilable
alien." In the eyes of the dominant culture, members of this group, for one reason or the other, do not fit in or belong, in this case, to the United States and should rather not be there.

Abelmann and Lie write that the term model minority first came up in the 1960s when, during the civil rights movement, the United States was charged with racism: "The model minority idea, by contrast, disproved the existence of American racism." The term was probably first used in January 1966, less than six months after the Watts riots in Los Angeles, in an article in the *New York Times Magazine.* The Asian American model minority is meant to be the "living proof that racism is not what keeps other people of color down." The term implies that anybody who tries hard enough will make the American dream come true for him or her. It presents Asian Americans as the example *par excellence.* This, of course, denies that there is inequality and racism against minorities within the United States in general and against Asian Americans in particular. In addition, the term does not do justice to the diversity within Asian America as to different ethnic and social backgrounds. Aspects such as generation and class are simply not considered. Moreover, of course, the term is highly unfair to those who cannot live up to the maxims of the model minority. This might concern individuals as well as whole groups of other minorities.

Seen from this point of view, it is no wonder than many people have argued that the idea of a model minority is racist.

There is a lot of support for the thesis that the idea of a model minority is "ideological, rather than an unproblematic reflection of social reality." One thing that substantiates it is the already mentioned strategic rise of the idea in the 1960s;

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more evidence can be found in sociological research proving that Asian Americans as a group cannot be labeled a model minority since not all of its members fulfill the requirements. For example, in a study on the academic performance of Asian Americans, Grace Kao has discovered that there indeed seems to be a cultural component that causes Asian Americans to place high importance on education. She reasons that factors such as the financial and educational situation of the parents are usually very important when it comes to the education of their children and points out that even in Asian American families with very low income and educational backgrounds, the education of the children is very highly valued and more is done to support children in gaining a good education than in comparable white or black families. She stresses that "higher achievement among children of immigrant parents" was found and concludes that it may be that "acculturation to the American mainstream negatively affects academic achievement." This would mean that there is, actually, a cultural element that encourages Asian Americans to succeed in educational institutions. Kao, however, also points out that there are also other reasons for a high emphasis on education. Many parents see it as a way to overcome the handicap of discrimination and a means to be able to compete with white job applicants and for these reasons encourage their children to perform well. This would then show that, next to possible cultural influences, discrimination and the wish to overcome it plays a role. Kao has also found out that many Asian Americans deliberately choose a scientific career because they assume that jobs in technical (vs. creative) fields are safer for them since these do not require a high degree of visibility. Working more in the background is often believed to be a way not to hit the "glass ceiling" too early.

255 Abelmann and Lie 167.
257 Kao 125.
258 Kao 151. The term "glass ceiling" implies that there is an invisible limit on just how high Asian Americans can rise in the ranks.
While all of the above-mentioned factors would support the model minority thesis, Kao also discovered that not all parents succeed in providing their children with the necessary means, although many Asian American parents seem to want their children get a good or even excellent education. This is due to the economic situation of many families. Therefore, even though Asian Americans in general appear to have a more positive attitude towards education than the rest of the population, this does not mean automatically that all Asian Americans are well-educated. In fact, some groups of Asian Americans are excluded from higher education for financial reasons.

The relatively high educational standard of some Asian immigrants and the conspicuous presence of Asian Americans particularly on Ivy League campuses might be among the foundation stones of the model minority myth. One has to consider, however, when comparing different groups of Asian Americans or comparing Asian Americans to other minorities that their starting points were not necessarily equal. While some Asian immigrants, and these are the ones who are conspicuous, come to the United States with a completed college education and even money to buy small businesses and are therefore in a relatively good position to improve their situation, others come as impoverished refugees without a tradition of education, so that vertical rise in society is more difficult. The success of some Asian Americans is not representative for all, and very often the poor among them are completely forgotten:

Thinking Asian Americans have succeeded, government officials have sometimes denied funding for social service programs designed to help Asian Americans learn English and find employment. Failing to realize that there are poor Asian families, college administrators have sometimes excluded Asian American students from Educational Opportunity Programs (EOP), which are intended for all students from low-income families.259

Ironically, the idea of them being a model minority does not necessarily help Asian

259 Takaki 478.
Americans to become fully accepted as Americans. Asian Americans are at times resented for presumably being the model minority because they are considered overly ambitious. Members of other minorities often dislike Asian Americans because of their presumed success and popularity with the white population. I will come back to this phenomenon in the discussion of the Los Angeles riots later on.

That the "unassimilable alien" is the opposite of the model minority member does not mean, however, that the latter is not considered an alien. He or she is turned into one when the situation calls for it or is subconsciously always considered an alien, such as with the inquiry, "Where are you from? – No, I mean where are you born?" – questions that even fourth-generation Chinese Americans might be asked. These kinds of questions are by no means mere exceptions, as many statements by Asian Americans show. The comedian Margaret Cho, a second-generation Korean American and ABC's *All American Girl*, states that she finds it very painful to be asked again and again where she is from, meaning where she is "really" from. She says it makes her feel as if she has no country, being considered a foreigner in the country in which she was born and grew up: "I really despise being looked on as a foreigner because in a lot of ways maybe I wish I was a foreigner. Then I would have a country."260 Historian Ronald Takaki, a third-generation Japanese American, starts his book *Strangers from a Different Shore* with an anecdote telling how when he was in college he was often invited to dinners for "foreign students" and was often asked how he learned such good English.261 He concludes that these things happen because the general population is ignorant about Asian American history and therefore often considers Asian Americans to be "strangers." The worst cases are probably those in which Asian Americans are told to go "home to where they belong." This does not only happen "accidentally" among private persons, but also publicly, as for example to Senator Daniel Inouye or scholar Elaine Kim, both

261 Takaki 3.
American-born.\textsuperscript{262}

A current example of the Asian as perpetual stranger is the case of Wen Ho Lee, a Taiwan-born American scientist who was accused of espionage for China in the U.S.\textsuperscript{263}

\section*{B. \textit{Sa-i-gu}: The Los Angeles Riots of 1992}

There are many examples in Asian American history of the fact that Asian Americans are not considered "real" Americans. The many discriminatory laws aimed mostly at Chinese Americans in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, as well as the unconstitutional internment of the Japanese Americans after WWII are the most striking examples. The Los Angeles riots in 1992 are yet another example of how Asian Americans, and specifically the Korean Americans as the latest "model minority," are not considered equal to the dominant society in moments of crisis.

After the police officers who were found guilty of beating African American Rodney King got away with an unexpectedly mild verdict, riots started all over downtown Los Angeles. It is well-known that the police did little to protect the businesses that were looted and robbed during the riots and instead concentrated on the protection of the predominantly white, residential neighborhoods nearby. Korean Americans ran many of these businesses. Elaine Kim describes what happened then as "a battle between the poor and disenfranchised and the invisible rich, who were being protected by a layer of clearly visible Korean American human

\textsuperscript{262} "During Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North's testimony before the joint House-Senate committee investigating the Iran-Contra scandal in 1987, co-chair Senator Daniel Inouye became the target of racial slurs: some of the telegrams and phone calls received by the committee told the senator he should 'go home to Japan where he belonged.'" (Takaki 6). Kim received similar reactions after an article of hers on the Los Angeles riots was published in \textit{Newsweek} (Kim, "Home is Where the Han Is" 223-26).

shields in a battle on the buffer zone." She points out that not only were Korean American businesses denied protection by police, for nothing happened when they dialed 911, but that they were also completely misrepresented by the white media. She claims that the media, instead of helping to ease the conflict, fueled it even more by repeatedly running stories about Soon Ja Du, the Korean American shopkeeper who killed Latasha Harlins in the previous year, and even broadcasting the store videotape showing the actual shooting at the height of the riots. Like many others, she also objects to the media focus on armed Korean American merchants. She stresses that in all news and media coverage, as well as in discussion rounds about the black-Korean conflict shown on TV, there was hardly ever a Korean American speaking about the issue. Instead, blacks and whites discussed it, and occasionally Japanese or Chinese Americans were asked for their opinion. According to Kim, hardly anybody mentioned organizations that have been working for years towards better understanding between blacks and Korean Americans, the fact that many friendships exist between blacks and Korean Americans, or the true reasons for the incidents. For Elaine Kim, the true reasons are racism, economic injustice, and poverty, "well-woven in the fabric of American life." In an article for the "My Turn" section of Newsweek magazine, she tried to summarize the reasons for sa-i-gu:

I wrote an essay accusing the news media of using Korean Americans and tensions between African and Korean Americans to divert attention from the roots of racial violence in the U.S. I asserted that these lie not in the Korean-immigrant-owned corner store situated in a community ravaged by

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264 Kim, "Home is Where the Han Is" 220.
265 Kim as well as Palumbo-Liu stress that the media played with images and, for example, created the "Korean Cowboy," a kind of Western hero who defends his private property against hordes of "wild and lawless" blacks, but also the one of the inscrutable Asian who dangerously aims his gun at an unknown target. They argue that these images are not true as such and should not be presented isolated from their context. More information on the manipulation of the images of Korean Americans through photos and news coverage can be found in Palumbo-Liu’s article.
266 Elaine Kim explains the use of the term sa-i-ju as follows: "Situated as we are on the border between those who have and those who have not, between predominantly Anglo and mostly African American and Latino communities, from our current interstitial positions in the American discourse of race, many Korean Americans have trouble calling what happened in Los Angeles an 'uprising.' At the same time, we cannot quite say it was a 'riot.' So some of us have taken to calling it sa-i-ju, April 29, after the manner of naming other events in Korean history." (Kim, "Home Is Where the Han Is" 216).
poverty and police violence, but reach far back into the corridors of corporate and government offices in Los Angeles, Sacramento, and Washington, D.C. I suggested that Koreans and African Americans were kept ignorant about each other by educational and media institutions that erase or distort their experiences and perspectives. I tried to explain how racism had kept my parents from ever really becoming Americans, but that having been born here, I considered myself American and wanted to believe in the possibility of an American dream.  

Elaine Kim received hate mail after her article was published, most of them saying that if she wants to be considered American, "she better" accept "American" realities, that there is no need for multiculturalism, and that if she did not like America as it is, she always had the option to go "back to Korea." The statements clearly show that even if you are a member of the "model minority," like Ms. Kim, a professor at the University of California at Berkeley, you are only accepted if you are silent and well-assimilated to the white mainstream. Out of the negative reactions she received, Kim draws the conclusion that holding on to a national consciousness might be a possibility for Korean Americans to survive racism. She stresses that formerly she had been very opposed to any kind of cultural nationalism, but that the events of sa-i-gu have caused her to change her mind. She asks for a "nationalism-in-internationalism." She is of the opinion that cultural nationalism will help Korean Americans to refuse subjugation and that it will be the first step in building a community, i.e. a community which will be fair to all of its members. Kim came to this idea because she believes that there always has to be a place for one to go back to and gather strength from in times of hardship. This does not have to be an actual country since this would be impossible for most Asian Americans, but it can be a feeling of national belonging. Seen in this context, the title of her article on sa-i-gu, "Home Is Where The Han Is," is quite ambiguous: she explains that "Han is a Korean word that means, loosely translated, the sorrow and anger that grow from the

267 Kim, "Home Is Where the Han Is" 222.
accumulated experiences of oppression." In this case it would refer to the United States as a home. "Han," written in different ideographs but transcribed the same way in Latin characters, is also the name of a river in Korea and of many other things relating to Korea. Considering this, the significance of the whole title changes. I think that Elaine Kim used this pun in order to express the difficulties and the conflict within many Korean Americans in finding out where their home is.

I believe that it would be wrong to give up all cultural heritage and try to assimilate into mainstream America, and that it is very important to maintain cultural differences and be proud of them. Moderate cultural nationalism is a way to do so, but it also bears many dangers. It is simply too exclusive to be constructive and useful. It might instead help separate ethnic groups even more and finally make understanding between them impossible. Examples for this can be seen when students of color remain exclusively among their ethnic group. Statements such as "I would never marry a white person," or referring to oneself as "kyopo," as many Korean American do, do not promote integration. The result would be a society consisting of small ethnic islands, unable or unwilling to form a community or to improve mutual understanding. It is very hard to find moderate cultural nationalism, since by nature, nationalism tends to be extreme. A better idea is probably what Elaine Kim proposed in her *Newsweek* article before she received the hate mail: to teach children and people in general more about each other, to help them understand each other and see each others' human sides instead of the stereotypes.

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268 Kim, "Home Is Where the Han Is" 215.
269 *Kyopo* is a Korean word meaning "Korean living abroad." Strictly speaking, it only applies to Korean emigrants, but it is very often used by second- or third-generation Korean Americans when referring to themselves. It to some degree implies that Korea is still the home country and that eventually one will return there. This idea, of course, bears the danger of never really caring for the American community one lives in and of never really trying to become part of it.
270 Today, Elaine Kim pursues this line again: in 1996 she published, together with Eui-Young Yu *East to America*, a collection of oral histories of Korean Americans. Each history presents the person who tells it as an individual, a human being, informing about this person's fate. Very different opinions and experiences are collected in this book to dispel stereotypes.
It seems obvious that a lot of what happened in April 1992 between African and Korean Americans was the result of stereotypes: African Americans were thinking of evil Korean shopkeepers, who, like with the stereotypical image of the bad Jew, are exploiting their communities, sucking the last cents from them and investing nothing in return. Korean Americans might in return have thought of criminal blacks, who are culturally portrayed as always stealing and shooting their fellow merchants. (This kind of stereotyping is, in fact, well substantiated in Ice Cube's "Black Korea"-lyrics.) It is important, therefore, not only to include more information (for example, literature and history) about different minority groups in the curricula of schools and universities, but also to continuously check the media, literature, film, and other public voices for stereotypes and hidden racism, so that they can be acted against and misunderstandings and violence can be prevented.


271 Korean Americans are sometimes referred to as "Asian Jews," using one stereotype to describe another. 272 This is, of course, not only true for the United States, but universally. Even in Germany, where the ethnic diversity of the population is less striking than in the United States, it is important to consider these things. Germany's population is far less homogeneous than it seems, and the fact that there are black, Asian, and Turkish Germans is often ignored. Not much is done in Germany against stereotyping and for mutual understanding. Even though something like sa-i-gu will probably never happen here, racism against individuals or whole groups of people is not so uncommon. Just as the idea of immigrants being "sojourners" has rendered whole groups and generations of immigrants of color in the United States temporary visitors who would never really be considered Americans and who therefore remain strangers, the concept of Gastarbeiter has had similar effects in Germany. Many people in Germany are irritated or at least surprised to find people who do not look "German" claiming that, in spite of this, they are. Racism and marginalization do sometimes result in cultural nationalism among minority groups in Germany as well. Comparisons between the U.S.-American situation and the German situation are sometimes drawn in the social sciences, but it would be even more interesting to compare cultural productions by minorities in Germany to those of Americans.
VII. Conclusion

A great deal of racism is based on ignorance about each others' history and culture and about the way these are intertwined with and maybe even similar to one's own. Nowadays, literature and other media are in a powerful position to work against ignorance, prejudices, and stereotypes and to play an important role in the process of helping to create or redefine identities in a positive direction. By securing questions of identity, the issues of home and belonging become more defined, too.

In this thesis, I have demonstrated the role that literary theory and literature play in this process through the example of Asian American literature. In the case of Asian America, it was through literature that the discussion about different Asian American identities was started and different options were expressed. The Aiiiiieeeel-editors started to correct stereotypes and tried to offer alternatives that were derived from literature. They distinguished between "fake" and "real" Asian American literature in their theoretical writings. In the anthologies, they criticized the "fake" and offered examples of the "real" literature, which, in their opinion, depicted Asian Americans realistically and not as mere stereotypes. The relatively restrictive ideas on Asian American identity expressed in these early theoretical discussions soon needed to be revised, however. Scholar Elaine Kim expressed it like this:

> what was excluded and rendered invisible - the unruly, the transgressive, and the disruptive - began to seep out from under the grids and appear from between the cracks. ... In the case of Asian America, this unruliness has come from women who never stop being both Asian and female, as well as from others rendered marginal by the essentializing aspects of Asian American cultural nationalism.²⁷³

While this theoretical discussion about Asian American identity intended to erase

stereotypes, it was the actual literature which realized the plans.

Works such as Louis Chu's *Eat A Bowl of Tea* or John Okada's *No-No Boy* made a start in defining an Asian American identity which was no longer defined by stereotypes and which no longer had to be either Asian or American, but could be both. Their characters found a home in the United States and became Americans of Asian origin. The Asian American sentiments and identities expressed in their works were close reflections of their time and circumstances, and even though they were quite progressive then, they were, from a more contemporary point of view, still incomplete because they dealt only with the male perspective and their communities.

Where Okada and Chu were able to deliver profiles and make a start in the search for identity, Maxine Hong Kingston managed to go into depth, to create a space for women, and to show that it is possible for both Asian American men and women to claim their place in the United States and to find an identity for themselves. Female writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston cleared the way for other writers who also wanted to write about topics besides ethnicity, and who wanted to be more individual.

It could be generally claimed that beginning in the 1960s, ethnic identity became the main topic in Asian American literature. This literature was more about group experiences than about individual persons, but this changed slowly after some time. Personal subjectivity and poetics started to rise in prominence, and the topics correspondingly reflected these changes. In the Asian American literature of today, ethnic identity and belonging are no longer necessarily the main topic, since many other issues are currently appearing in these works as well.

Even though the deconstruction of stereotypes has begun and is continuing, there is still a great deal of work to do, as new stereotypes arise all the time. Also, the United States as a home and a place of belonging has to be claimed again and again, since it is not a stable home and can be taken away in times of crisis, as is demonstrated with the cases of Japanese Americans during WWII or of Korean
Americans in Los Angeles in 1996, or, in the recent past, the treatment of many Arab Americans after September 11th, 2001.

Asian American literature so far has helped many Asian Americans to understand their situation better and to find a point of reference. It hopefully banishes many stereotypes among non-Asian readers and gives a more accurate picture of what being Asian American means and what it may include and how it is a part of the history and culture of the United States. Similar things are taking place in visual and performing arts. In mainstream film and television, genuine depictions of Asian Americans are still rare; this might be because financial support is sparse in these media.274 It is especially important for young people to find points of reference, role models, and beauty ideals with whom they can identify, making them feel more "normal" and acceptable so that they do not feel as if they have to try and keep up with mainstream ideals.

The need for further research on the media representation of Asian Americans is compelling. Other subjects that would certainly be worth examining more closely have already been mentioned; they include Asian American art, cinema, and poetry. Not much work has yet been done on certain Asian American groups, such as gays and lesbians or newer groups of Asian American immigrants. It would also be interesting to compare Asian America to other minority groups within the United States and Europe. A worthwhile task would be to investigate recurring motifs in Asian American literature and find out which ones are typical for Asian American literature and which can be found universally.275 Ways to best integrate the literature and history of minority groups in general and of Asian America in particular into school and university curricula likewise need to be explored.

Much work remains to be done in research as well as in fighting stereotypes.

274 Of course, there are many independent films depicting the Asian American experience, but they are not easily accessible to a mainstream audience.

275 Sau-ling Cynthia Wong's book *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity To Extravagance* is an important contribution to this subject.
Asian American literature has managed to embark on a successful voyage, and as the numbers of newly published fiction and non-fiction books show, it will continue its important work.
VIII. Plates


Plate 3: Jean Shin, *Untitled*, 1998, nylons and thread, overall: 65" x 65".
Plate 4: Jean Shin, *Untitled* (detail), 1998, nylons and thread, overall: 65" x 65".

Courtesy of the artist.
Plate 5: Jean Shin, *Untitled (Hair Drawing # 1)*, 1998, hair, mylar and glass, 20" x 24" framed.
Plate 6: Jean Shin, *Untitled (Hair Drawing # 2)*, 1998, hair, mylar and glass, 22" x 20" framed.

Plate 7: Jean Shin, *Untitled (Hair Drawing # 3)*, 1998, hair, mylar and glass, 29" x 20" framed.
Plate 8: Jean Shin, *Untitled (Hair Drawing # 4)*, 1998, hair, mylar and glass, 26" x 20" framed.

Plate 9: Jean Shin, *Untitled (Hair Drawing # 5)*, 1998, hair, mylar and glass, 20" x 24" framed.
Plate 10: Jean Shin, *Untitled (Hair Drawing # 6)*, 1998, hair, mylar and glass, 20" x 24" framed.
Plate 11: Jean Shin, *Nett*, 1998, hair and wisdom teeth, 6" x 12" x 12" each. Courtesy of the artist.
Courtesy of the artist.
Plate 16: Young Chung, *I am a plane*, 1998, Type R, 5" x 7".

Plate 17: Young Chung, *bona fide*, 1998, Type R, 25" x 21".
Plate 18: Young Chung, *I am Young Chung*, 1998, Type R, 41" x 31".

Courtesy of the artist.
Plate 19: Young Chung, *Mother (On Board Southwest Flight 969)*, 1998, cibachrome, 16" x 20".

Plates 21-27: Yong Soon Min, *Defining Moments*, 1992, series of 6 black and white photos (and a text), each 20"x16". 
Courtesy of the artist.
Plates 29-33: Yong Soon Min, *Mother Load*, 1996, 4 part sculpture: fabric, clothing, photo transfer on fabric, color snapshots, each approx. 3'x3'.
Courtesy of the artist.


Courtesy of the artist.


Courtesy of the artist.


Courtesy of the artist.
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