

# INTRODUCTION: PERIODIZATION, RACE, AND ASIAN AMERICAN SUB-GENRES

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Unpublished narratives. Legal cases in which they couldn't testify. *Japonisme*. World Exposition sideshows, travelogues, *manga*, and vaudeville. Yellowface performance, proverbs, Peking opera, non-English language journalism, English language *haiku*. Internment diaries, Angel Island poems, second-language phrasebooks. If Asian American culture has been canonized in the form of the ethnic *Bildungsroman*, it has also given rise to a proliferation of marginal and usually less recognized subgenres—a proliferation whose aims ranged from political intervention and critical intertextuality to self-exoticizing strategies of niche marketing. In the century preceding the dramatic increase of interest in Asian Americans before and during WWII, Asian American cultural production is characterized not by the expected dearth of documentation, but rather by an embarrassment of riches, where “embarrassment” involves all its etymological denotations of blockage, obstruction, and shame. Particularly, up until ethnic autobiography came into its own in the 1930s and 1940s with the publication of relatively popular works by Younghill Kang, Lin Yutang, Carlos Bulosan, Pardee Lowe, Jade Snow Wong, and Toru Matsumoto—along with a number of firsthand accounts of Japanese American Internment—Asians in America occupied a variety of subgenres that failed, in various ways, to meet

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either the demands of primarily white audiences or the exigencies of political representation.<sup>1</sup>

Confronted with the need to consolidate both a sense of pan-ethnic cultural nationalism and evidence of literary quality defined by formalist standards, Asian American literary criticism has tended to privilege autobiographies and ethnic *Bildungsromans* over other literary and mass cultural forms.<sup>2</sup> The popularity of the autobiographical novel has provided Asian American literature with a place in American literary history and a claim to canonicity. Guiyou Huang's commentary on Asian American autobiography makes explicit the often unacknowledged cost of this overvaluation of autobiography as a means of disproving the subgeneric status often assigned to ethnic cultural production:

Asian American autobiography is facetiously termed a *subgenre* of American autobiography, but when one considers the great diversity in the composition of the multiethnic American literary canon, and the fact that many autobiographies written by ethnics have taken very prominent front-row seats in contemporary American literature, the prefix "sub" in *subgenre* becomes problematized, for it connotes meanings of 'under,' 'less than,' and "not quite." Asian American autobiography is a type of ethnic autobiography, which should be parallel with, not subordinate to, the so-called American autobiography traditionally associated with white America.... (13)

By simply "adding"<sup>3</sup> Asian American literature to an existing generic category, Huang's legitimizing strategy risks reinscribing both the nationalist exceptionalism inherent in "American autobiography" and the distinction between mass culture and "high" culture, while constructing a set of priorities for Asian American cultural history that marginalizes texts produced prior to the 1940s.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For illuminating commentaries on Lin, Matsumoto, and Kang, see also the essays in this issue by Sorensen and Lye.

<sup>2</sup> On the overvaluation of the novel in Asian American literary history, see Yu's essay in this issue. On the Asian American *Bildungsroman*, see Lowe and Chu.

<sup>3</sup> In his controversial essay on "third world" literature as nationalist allegory, Fredric Jameson gestures towards a theory of "sub-genre" while warning against the temptation of attempting to simply "add" third world texts to the canon of "great" works: "This is to attempt dutifully to wish away all traces of that 'pulp' format which is constitutive of *sub-genres*, and it invites immediate failure insofar as any passionate reader of Dostoyevsky will know at once, after a few pages, that those kinds of satisfactions are not present [in non-canonical texts]" (65, emphasis added).

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence and Cheung qualify "the presentist trend in existing scholarship" by redirecting attention to the authority and identity of historical authors (2); however, I would add that the problem has more to do with supplanting a cultural nationalist "presentism" whose very success (in creating departments and initiatives in Asian American studies) has made it, to some extent, obsolete. What we need—and what motivates many of the essays collected here—is an updated, transnational history of the present that returns to early texts and contexts in order to understand the genealogy of contemporary issues like diaspora, migration, translation, comparative racialization, and empire.

Several recent studies have begun to reexamine these early cultural productions—linguistic, formal, and geographical anomalies that, strictly speaking, may not even qualify as “Asian American” in the cultural nationalist sense of the phrase. Two essay collections—Josephine Lee, Imogene Lim, and Yuko Matsukawa’s *Re/Collecting Early Asian America* and Keith Lawrence and Floyd Cheung’s *Rediscovered Legacies: Authority and Identity in Early Asian American Literature*—recover a number of important texts produced prior to the disciplinary formation of Asian American Studies in the 1960s while also broaching questions about historiography, geographical crossings, and alternative versions of “identity” that seem essential to studies focusing on this period. Along with recent studies of phenomena as widespread as yellowface performance, Chinatown photography, racially motivated parades in Arizona, Anne May Wong, and Charles Longfellow’s obsession with Japanese tattoos, these collections attest to the historical and theoretical challenges posed by the diversity of early Asian American subgenres.<sup>5</sup> These studies share a sense that the very definition of the scope and field of “Asian American” studies must be shifted to account for early texts and contexts. The teleological narratives of immigration, English language education, and intergenerational conflicts of identity that have become common themes in Asian American narratives were largely foreclosed by legal obstacles to “assimilation” during the Exclusion era. Instead, the experiences of early Asians in America were geographically, ethnically, and linguistically diverse, often moving in multiple directions, crossing and recrossing borders, and experimenting with various modes of translation and hybridity.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the increasing relevance of such marginalized or niche forms to cultural history, and despite the attentiveness with which scholars like Franco Moretti and Pierre Bourdieu have theorized distinctions between “low” and “high” culture, literary critics have yet to formulate a compelling theory of subgenre. Genre, of course, has been theorized and deconstructed by leading scholars to such an extent that it is now often taken for granted, or even neglected in

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<sup>5</sup> See Moon, Anthony Lee, Cheung, Leong, and Guth, as well as the books considered in this issue’s book reviews.

<sup>6</sup> Lee, Lim, and Matsukawa, for example, emphasize the multiplicity of entry points into the Americas, as well as the need for “a truly panethnic Asian American history” and the multiple “crossings, exchanges, and returns” often overlooked in favor of more linear narratives of immigration and assimilation (6, 8). See also Yin’s *Chinese American Literature Since the 1850s* for an illuminating overview of Chinese language writing published in the U.S., and Liu for discussion of several texts that practice an increasingly urgent form of “transnational historiography.” For broader considerations of international Asian American studies, see Davis and Ludwig, ed. and Mazumdar.

observance of poststructural or New Historicist preferences for the heterogeneous specificities of text and context. Thus, Blanchot famously argues that “The book is the only thing that matters...far from genres, outside of the categorical subdivisions—prose, poetry, novel, document—in which it refuses to lodge and to which it denies the power of establishing its place and determining its form. A book no longer belongs to a genre; every book stems from literature alone...” (qtd in Todorov 13). A similar claim can be made regarding the priority of historical circumstances, insofar as the idiosyncrasies of *context* may appear to be even farther removed from genres than individual texts. But if overemphasizing generic conventions threatens to either dehistoricize a text or downplay its rhetorical idiosyncrasies, the concept of subgenre—often defined as a patterned and repeatable intersection between a particular genre and a specified motif or theme—attends to precisely the intersection between the systematic description of genres and the analysis of their content.<sup>7</sup> Thinking about subgenres calls for investigations that cover not only the relative efficacy of a particular blending of form and content, but also the historical and geopolitical conditions that account for the repetition and recognition (or the singularity and apparent irrelevance) of such a blending.<sup>8</sup>

This collection of essays approaches the theorization and analysis of subgenre through an examination of early Asian American cultural production in a period that has largely been overshadowed by a critical focus on dominant forms like the Realist novel and the Modernist poem, along with the ethnic *Bildungsroman*. This historical focus not only counteracts the tendency towards abstraction and generalization that characterizes many structuralist theories of genre—it also foregrounds the relationship between subgenres and geopolitical conditions characterized by racial coding and geographically uneven development. What formal and historical circumstances prevent subgenres from emerging as dominant, highly visible genres that serve as receptacles and redistributors of cultural capital?<sup>9</sup> Do recognizable genres such as Realism, travelogues, and fairy tales

<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the New Historicism’s most compelling contribution to questions of form has taken the form of rigorously historicized analyses of popular subgenres: examples include Amy Kaplan on the adventure novel of the 1890s, Jane Tompkins on the sentimental novel, and Sharon Marcus on the urban ghost story. For a historically and geographically systematic account of the cyclical rise and fall of novelistic genres, see Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees*.

<sup>8</sup> Homi Bhabha has formulated the dialectical relation between repetition and difference—a relation that grounds any inquiry into literary genre—within the colonial and postcolonial context as the phenomenon of “colonial mimicry.”

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Jameson, who writes that “the deviation of the individual text from some deeper narrative structure directs our attention to those determinate changes in the historical situation which block a full

depend on murkier subgenres for their very existence? To what extent does the prefix of *sub*-genre reflect the experiences of racial subjection, national subject formation, and the expressive possibilities of the subaltern? Can subgenres be imagined not only as subsumed versions of a recognized genre but also as hardly recognizable subversions of that genre?

### I. The Law of Subgenre

Genre has often been approached through a top-down, taxonomic method that prescribes the conditions for the formation of subgenres through combination or subdivision. Alastair Fowler, for example, proposes that “subgenres are made by distinguishing additional genre-linked motifs or topics”—a continual and potentially interminable process of “division and subdivision of kinds” that combines existing genres with new and repeatable motifs (112).<sup>10</sup> But if generic criticism often begins with abstract genres and subdivides these into subgenres in an act of retroactive classification, the actual process of cultural production—and particularly “subaltern” cultural production—inverts this process. Writers, artists, and other producers who are marginalized from inherited traditions and the dominant forms (and often languages) of representation do not begin with genres, but rather with mixed and hybrid forms, failed texts, utterances addressed to no preexisting audience<sup>11</sup>—or to multiple, conflicting audiences. Where early Asian American writers do deploy established genres such as the travelogue, the foreign language wordbook, the autobiography, and the family (or village) history, they often do so in a manner that is either tactical or self-commodifying, or both: Sui Sin Far’s autobiographical “Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian” and Onoto Watanna’s pseudo-Japanese romances are classic examples of these tendencies.<sup>12</sup> In these cases, subgenres are either prior to genres—a sort of unorganized and as-yet unrepeated stuff out of which genres are discerned and reproduced—or else they are self-conscious *deployments* (in both senses of the word: a deconstructive “unfolding” and a revelatory “putting

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manifestation or replication of the structure on the discursive level” (146).

<sup>10</sup> See also Rosmarin’s comments on I.A. Richards’ claim that “all thinking... is sorting” (14).

<sup>11</sup> Regarding ethnic or “minoritarian” writers who address an as-yet nonexistent public, Deleuze and Guattari write, “It is literature that produces an active solidarity in spite of skepticism; and if the writer is in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more the possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility...” (17).

<sup>12</sup> See Nguyen 33-59.

on display”) of dominant genres. They thus require an archaeological<sup>13</sup> approach, rather than one that either sets out from or ends up with a map or *combinatoire* of generic categories. How can we theorize and historicize subgenres without either prioritizing genres and the critical and commercial privilege that come with the latter, or else attempting to reassign that priority to subgenres?

To begin with, we should rethink subgenre against the grain of subdivision by situating it not amid a morphological and synchronic “system” of genres and subgenres but rather within a historically contingent hierarchy of expressive forms.<sup>14</sup> The notion of a *hierarchy* of genres, which has been around since Aristotle’s *Poetics*, draws attention to the always contested ideological and economic conditions that guarantee the prominence of particular genres and the relative invisibility or contingency of sub-genres. Thus, Ireneusz Opacki argues that the “socio-historical factors” that underlie every literary period give rise to a dominant or “royal” genre that shapes all the other genres subordinated beneath it: “*a literary genre, entering, in the course of evolution, the field of a particular literary trend, will enter into a very close ‘blood relationship’ with the form of the royal genre that is particular to that current*” (121). Opacki’s metaphor of generic hybridization (i.e., secondary genres adopting and assimilating features of the “royal” genre in order to gain recognition) in terms of “blood relationships” makes his analysis of generic hierarchies especially pertinent to early Asian American texts, since the latter appeared (or failed to appear) in a literary market whose leading genres and movements—such as Realism, Naturalism, and Modernism—quietly policed the boundaries of race and nation.<sup>15</sup> In a culture so violently hostile to the notion of racial miscegenation, were particular texts barred from the very possibility of entering into “a very close ‘blood relationship’” with the bourgeois civility of Realist fiction? Opacki suggests that “the royal genre draws towards itself all the remaining literary genres of a given period,” but are there cases where the royal genre actually rejects racialized or

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Foucault, who opens his archaeology of the human sciences with Borges’s account of the crisis of categories instigated by Asiatic divisions of knowledge: “This book first arose out of a passage in Borges [which] quotes a ‘certain Chinese encyclopaedia’ in which it is written that ‘animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame...(g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification...(m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies’” (xv).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Bennett, who writes that “the proper concern of genre theory is not to define genres—for this can only result in sets of institutionalized prescriptions for the regulation of contemporary reading practices—but to examine the composition and functioning of generic systems” (112).

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Blair’s *Henry James and the Writing of Race and Nation* and Michaels, *Our America*. On Naturalism and Asiatic racial form, see Lye, *America’s Asia*.

popular subgenres and pushes them away? Were Asian American subgenres excluded (or included as excluded) from the very struggle for cultural recognition? If so, were such exclusions necessary for the very constitution of the hierarchy of accepted genres and aesthetic movements?

Questions such as these identify the production and exclusion of Asian American subgenres as a key site of processes of social and racial subjugation, subordination, and subjectification. For aesthetic classifications are intimately linked to the production and maintenance of social hierarchies and relationships across the lines of class, race, gender, and geography. As Jacques Derrida observes in “The Law of Genre,”

The question of the literary genre is not a formal one: it covers the motif of the law in general, of generation in the natural and symbolic senses, of birth in the natural and symbolic senses, of the generation difference, sexual difference between the feminine and masculine gender, of the hymen between the two, of a relationless relation between the two, of an identity and difference between the feminine and masculine. (243)

With its etymological ties to “gender,” “generation,” and gens, literary “genre” helps produce and maintain relations of social and biological reproduction—relations that, as Derrida and others have shown, depend on a logic of constitutive exclusion. Thus the “law of genre” turns out to be determined by “a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy...a sort of participation without belonging” (227). If the term “subgenre” generally names subcategories that belong to a particular genre, might there also be other subgenres that go unrecognized, unclaimed, and never properly repeated—subjugated forms of expression that participate in the larger system of genres only as excluded, as parasites, as never quite belonging?<sup>16</sup>

For the hierarchizing prefix of “subgenres” does not mean that they all belong to larger literary categories in the same way, or on an equal footing. Not even all *subgenres* are created equal. Before 1945, the Asian American *Bildungsroman* did not enjoy the status of Eurocentric variants that focus on young artists (the *Künstlerroman*, as in *David Copperfield* or *Portrait of the Artist as*

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Peter Hitchcock’s engaging meditation on “The Genre of Postcoloniality.” Postcoloniality, Hitchcock suggests, “is called upon by history to undo the genres given to it”: like the proletariat, “it must undo every manifestation of classification against which it is precipitated, yet expire at its own rendezvous of victory” (301, 299). While many Asian American subgenres share this sense of antagonism towards received generic norms, they do not generally share the teleology of Hitchcock’s “genre of postcoloniality”: however much they stretch or test its boundaries, writers seldom view their subordinated racial and national identities as something to be entirely sublated or annulled. For another useful overview of the political implications of genre mixing, see Heath.

a *Young Man*) or the process of education (the *Erziehungsroman*: for example, Rousseau's *Emile*, or Colette's *Claudine*).<sup>17</sup> Likewise, early travelogues about the U.S. by Asian writers—such as Joseph Heco's *Narrative of a Japanese* and Yone Noguchi's *American Diary of a Japanese Girl*—never received the attention accorded to texts like Charles Dickens's *American Notes* or Henry James's *American Scene*. Of course, the relative failure (in terms of both reception and literary quality) of Asian American subgenres can be explained by their writers' failure to master Western genres and what was in many cases a second language. However, the incentives to write in English reflect the roles of geopolitical inequalities and a relatively subaltern status in imposing Western (and often—as in the case of most travel writing—inherently exoticizing) formal conventions on foreign or immigrant writers.<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile, Euro-American writers produced innumerable examples of aesthetic subjugation, where Asiatic figures subsist in the margins of travelogues, novels, and visual culture. Asian bodies, labor, and culture were subordinated within the genres of American orientalism, as painters, writers, and decorative artists capitalized on the fad of an aestheticized and implicitly feminized *Japonisme* (Benfey); naturalists like Jack London and Frank Norris employed Asiatic stereotypes to refer “not to persons but to a host of modernity's dehumanizing effects (laboring conditions, groups, entities, corporations)” (Lye 11); ethnographic representations like Arnold Genthe's photographs of San Francisco's Chinatown reproduced ideas about that community's inscrutability, traditionalism, and ethnic “authenticity”; and in the sphere of mass culture, vaudeville shows, world expositions, and early films commodified the techniques and bodies of Asian performers. All these practices contributed to dominant discourses of “American orientalism,” which alternately denigrated, aestheticized, feminized, and excluded Asiatic subjects in accordance with the changing needs of capitalism.<sup>19</sup> In many of these cases, authorship can be viewed as simultaneously collective—a conjunction of Asian or immigrant authors and their Western

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Lowe: “[T]he structural location of U.S. minority literature may produce effects of dissonance, fragmentation, and irresolution even and especially when that literature appears to be performing a canonical function. Even those novels that can be said to conform more closely to the formal criteria of the *Bildungsroman* express a contradiction between the demand for a univocal developmental narrative and the historical specificities of racialization, ghettoization, violence, and labor exploitation” (100).

<sup>18</sup> For an analysis of the geographically and linguistically uneven dynamics of literary production on a larger scale, see Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*.

<sup>19</sup> For suggestive studies of “American orientalism” at different historical periods, see Schueller, Wu, Lye, Leong, and Robert Lee.

appropriators—and asymmetrical, insofar as Western appropriations or renditions of Asiatic themes generally enjoyed greater prestige and profits than the cultural productions of the Asian diaspora.

But in addition to the dynamics of subjection, we must also take into account the related positions of the subliminal, the subterranean, and the subconscious. The very “inscrutability” indicated by Genthe’s photographs of Chinatown’s cellars, doorways, and shadows marks a potential form of empowerment. In a time when communities of literate Asian immigrants were too small and atomized (i.e., Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans did not yet think of themselves as “Asian Americans” with allied political agendas) to support authors who addressed them exclusively, Asian American artists were effectively forced to address the Anglo-American market and its exoticizing preferences. Thus, political commentary was often subterranean, couched in acceptable terms and within larger bodies of work, as when Yone Noguchi’s self-feminizing *American Diary of a Japanese Girl* presents a scathing critique of John Luther Long’s representation of Japanese womanhood while simultaneously poking fun at Japanese mispronunciations of English: “The honourable author of ‘Madame Butterfly’ is Mr. Wrong. (Do you know that Japanese have no boundary between L and R?) Undoubtedly, he is qualified to be a Wrong” (238). Lin Yutang—author of the bestseller *My Country and My People* (1935)—pursued a different strategy, writing self-mocking, lighthearted, and apolitical texts for his Anglophone readers while railing against the white “foreign devils” and their racist institutions in his Chinese-language publications (Yin, “Worlds” 180-2). Despite the market’s demand for texts that exhibited a proper degree of subjectification, then, Asian American subgenres provided space for a range of creative, strategic, and critical practices that exceeded their ideological functions as documents of cultural ambassadorship and self-exoticization.<sup>20</sup> In addition to experimenting with indirect, subliminal forms of expression and critique, writing during this early period—perhaps in part because it lacked a consistent audience—often exceeded conventional geographical and linguistic trajectories of immigration or assimilation, instead enacting circulations of language, forms, and bodies that traversed and connected sites on both sides of the Pacific Ocean.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Zhou, who explains that “the dismissal of Asian American authors’ incorporation and reinvention of dominant literary genres as ‘assimilationist’ not only ignores how writers have actively manipulated and reinvented literary conventions but also casts dominant ideologies and literary genres into fixed, totalizing, and invulnerable systems” (4-5)

Indeed, subgenres may provide more wiggle-room for innovation than more prestigious genres, whose higher visibility necessarily subjects them to more intense surveillance. Despite their efficacy as a platform for protest and first-person testimonies against racism, the ethnic autobiographies that rose to prominence around the 1940s came with a number of expectations and conventions—what Claudia Tate has called, in a different context, “the protocols of race”—including the privileging of realism, the explicit thematization of race, and the commodification of ethnic authenticity. Although he subordinates them to more abstract “kinds” or genres, Fowler acknowledges that subgenres enjoy a sort of ontological or creative priority, as well as a volatility that continually challenges critical subdivisions:

Subgenres also threaten to defy subdivision in that they are extremely volatile. To determine the features of a subgenre is to trace a diachronic process of imitation, variation, innovation—in fact, to verge on source study. At the level of subgenre, innovation is life. Here, simple resemblance hardly produces a literary work: at the very least there is elegant variation. And from time to time quite fresh subgenres will be invented, enlarging the kind in new directions altogether. It may be the conventionality of subgenres that strikes the beginner. But in reality they are the common means of renewal. (114)

For those subjected to overseas expansion, racial coding, systematic violence, enforced silence, and social exclusion, too, it can be said that innovation is life. Those with no legally recognized voice, few forums in which to be heard, and virtually no direct precursors can only speak by means of inelegant variations on genres, idioms, and themes that do not properly belong to them. The essays included here track the development and creative reappropriations of these inherited discourses during the century that spanned from the so-called “opening” of Japan by Commodore Perry in 1852-4 to the emergence of a recognizable (or at least a broadly recognized) tradition of Asian American writing in the years leading up to World War II.

The issue begins with a series of studies focusing on “American Orientalisms”—the representation and, often, subordination of Asiatic bodies and spaces within dominant texts and discourses. John Haddad provides a detailed study of one of the earliest and most influential popular sources of U.S. orientalism: the lectures and travel writings of Bayard Taylor during the 1850s. Taylor’s physiognomic and ethnographic descriptions represent an early instance of comparative racialization in which the Japanese are endowed with all the symmetry and grace that the Chinese supposedly lack. Hoang Gia Phan further explores

the process of comparative racialization while demonstrating that the upholding of birthright citizenship for Chinese Americans in *United States v. Wong Kim Ark* was not an “accident” in post-Reconstruction legal discourses characterized by the adjudication of black/white racial issues in terms of “formal equality.” Sheila Honess’s reading of Kirk Munroe’s *A Son of Satsuma* develops a theoretical account of literary setting that emphasizes cultural geographical notions of absolute, relative, and relational space. Her conclusions about the novel’s setting as a function of both real and desired U.S.-Japanese relations offer both theoretical underpinnings and a historical framework for rethinking the development of a circum-Pacific space around the turn of the twentieth century. Thy Phu demonstrates how Arnold Genthe’s Chinatown photographs elide the agency of Chinese subjects by imposing upon them both the photographer’s own fantasies and gendered ideals of “civility” that were defined in opposition to U.S. citizenship.

The following section, “Writing Asian/American Lives,” examines how Asian writers who visited or resided in the U.S. responded to these externally imposed legal and imaginary formations. My essay in this section reconstructs the freelance career of Wong Chin Foo, arguing that his prolific and multifarious magazine writings are unified by a critical autoethnographic practice designed to transform public opinion in the first, provisional decade of Chinese Exclusion. In a discussion that spans Europe, Japan, and the U.S., Edward Marx tracks the origins of English-language haiku to the writings of Yone Noguchi, the Japanese writer and professor of English who lived, worked, and studied in the U.S. between 1893 and 1904. Catherine Ceniza Choy offers a critical biography of Encarnacion Alzona, a Filipina intellectual who, according to Choy, offered a measured, feminist response to colonialist discourses on the Philippines in her seminal study, *The Filipina Woman: Her Social, Political, and Economic Status, 1565-1933*. Leif Sorensen details how early Korean American autobiographical writings—New Il Han’s *When I Was a Boy in Korea* and Younghill Kang’s *The Grass Roof*—appropriated, undermined, and re-scripted dominant sociological and Modernist accounts of “Asia” by developing their own stylistic practices of autoethnography and literary translation. Finally, Christine Hong critiques the recent monumentalization and domestication of Dosan Ahn Chang-ho as a model “Korean American,” and offers a more historically nuanced account that emphasizes the strategic nature of the exiled Korean nationalist’s entreaties to American readers.

A group of essays on “Asian American Fictions” explores formal alternatives to life writing or autobiography, as well as the broader problem of the constructed or fictive nature of “Asian America” itself. Richard Jean So focuses on relationships between Chinese Exclusion and literary form evident in the writings of Theodore Dreiser and proletarian novelist H.T. Tsiang, elucidating transnational, dialectical relationships between literary realism, racial sympathy, and what Tsiang called “revolutionary romanticism.” Timothy Yu addresses the compromises and frictions that occur when genres “travel” between colonial and metropolitan locations, placing José García Villa’s short-story collection *Footnote to Youth* in the context of alternative genres like cultural-nationalist novels, ethnic autobiography, and lyric poetry in order to think through why critics have largely neglected to theorize and historicize the Asian American short story. Colleen Lye presents an extended meditation on how Asian American literary form expresses the historically contingent contradictions and internal differences inherent in “Asian American” identity. Focusing on the WWII era, Lye proposes that Asian American literary form is partly exemplified by a “double distance—between Asian and American cultures, and among Asian ethnic or national cultures.”

This collection concludes with four essays that explore the vast, underexamined archive of “Community Subgenres” produced by Asian Americans or Asians living in the U.S. Victor Mendoza recovers a fascinating array of student magazines published by Filipino *pensionados* studying in the U.S. following the Philippine-American War, demonstrating that their negotiations of racialization and compulsive heteronormativity are fraught with ambivalent undertones. Shuang Shen maps the global circulation of Peking Opera in the 1930s through a case study of S. I. Hsiung’s immensely popular play, *Lady Precious Stream*. Shen’s emphasis on concepts like circulation and diaspora demonstrates the play’s importance to both Modernist departures from traditional realism and the contemporaneous reformation of Peking Opera in China. Zhou Xiaojing revisits the popular vernacular verses published in Chinese-language newspapers and anthologies during the early 1900s, demonstrating that their written form takes on new, hybridized or “reterritorialized” meanings in the contexts of San Francisco’s Chinatown and a readership characterized by diverse regional spoken dialects. In a reading of *The Four Immigrants Manga* framed by historical developments on both sides of the Pacific, Mayumi Takada attends to the problem of cultural homelessness faced by early Japanese Americans—a problem inflected

by Japan's militarism, U.S. exclusion laws, and the temporal incongruities resulting from rapid modernization.

Despite the often flawed and constrained nature of many cultural productions by and about Asian Americans before World War II, these texts nevertheless represent a diversity of perspectives and a relative freedom from generic conventions that exceed the possibilities available to later and more celebrated ethnic autobiographies and *Bildungsromans*. Here, the situation of early Asian America resonates with Franco Moretti's argument about unintended effects of the Inquisition's ban on the circulation of novels in Latin American colonies:

once the novel was eliminated, the result (other things being equal) was a literary system that, far from being poorer, was *much richer than its European counterpart*. An absurd result, at first sight: a subtraction producing an increase. But a bit less absurd if you think of literature as a kind of ecosystem, and of the novel, for its part, as the most fearsome predator of the last half millennium. In such a scenario, a world without novels certainly loses one narrative form: unlike Europe, however, it preserves *all the other forms* that the novel would otherwise have swept away. (*Modern Epic* 236)

Can the richness of early Asian American culture be located in its very poverty in the field of prominent and marketable aesthetic genres? Do early Asian American subgenres preserve and invent all the other forms that ethnic autobiography later swept under the rug of identity politics and assimilation narratives? Or is there, rather, a dialectical relationship between these diverse, imperfect subgenres and the dominant forms of literary fiction, historiography, and mass culture? In exploring these questions through a range of case studies, the essays collected here present historical and theoretical frameworks that will revise our narratives of both Asian American cultural history and its intersections with topics ranging from American literature and various aesthetic movements to the history of comparative racial formation.

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