

Introduction

“We All Have Our Reasons”

A woman talks to her grandfather in his “aging fortune cookie factory.” She thinks, as if discovering something new about him, “I realized that he was very much like the thing he’d spent his life making: a hard, protective shell containing haiku-like wisdom.” A little later, she reads what is written inside a fortune cookie her grandfather gives her: “Your love life will be happy and harmonious” (fig. intro.1).¹ In this way, Adrian Tomine’s *Shortcomings* begins as an ending to what seems to be a conventional story about growing up Asian American. This is a story about the process of individual maturation, bridging a generational divide, and coming to peace with one’s ethnic difference from a majority culture. It is preoccupied with self-discovery. It placates conflict with epiphany. It is swift to allow food to act as a convenient marker of difference. Above all else, it is prepared to reach a conclusion of some kind, a sense of arrival and closure that signals the end of the story. The conclusion is easily reached, and is as a result pat and dull. As if to emphasize such expectations about the kinds of stories Asian Americans are likely to tell, the visual arrangement of the figures is static and uninteresting. The complex perspectives of the panels do little to compensate for the lack of motion in the images. This renders in graphic form the wooden narrative movement the story mimes.

The next page reveals that these images were comprised of shots from an independent film being screened at the “Asian American digi-fest.” This detail explicitly puts race and enjoyment at odds with each other because focusing on race apparently leads to storytelling that is uninteresting, predictable, and boring. With brutal frankness, Ben Tanaka says to his girlfriend Miko Hayashi, who is one of the organizers of the festival, “Because



Figure intro.1.

Detail from Adrian Tomine's *Shortcomings*. The figures in these panels are noticeably static.

everyone knows it's garbage. But they clap for it anyway because it was made by some Chinese girl from Oakland! I mean, why does everything have to be some big 'statement' about race? Don't any of these people just want to make a movie that's *good*?"² In this last comment, *Shortcomings* explicitly sets the film festival's desire to show support for the work of a community member's fledgling attempts at self-expression, acknowledging—if weakly—the ways in which such attempts are not fostered or valued in other venues, against Ben's apparently more individualistic desire to hold Asian American cultural producers to a presumably higher, race-free standard. As an example of Asian American storytelling, the film represents for Ben what is common and uninspiring. Like the "shortcomings" of the title,

the opening panels gesture toward disappointment and a failure to live up to a different set of expectations. The alternative Ben celebrates is a storytelling that will entertain, enlighten, provoke thought, and contain some surprises. In such a narrative ideal, conventions and unfolding of events will not so easily line up with each other.

This book starts with this example for a number of reasons. First, it exemplifies the complex ways in which Asian American writers have approached the topic of form. The fact that *Shortcomings* is a graphic narrative that begins as an explicit critique of a film highlights the ways in which Asian American literature is constantly commenting on and drawing from other texts of various kinds. Indeed, it is often an amalgam of forms, genres, and mediums: borrowing, confusing, mimicking, and violating. The spoken-word artist Beau Sia's comedic volume of poems entitled *A Night without Armor II: The Revenge*, for instance, lampoons the title of *A Night without Armor*, a book of poetry written by the pop star Jewel. Sia's satiric and often vulgar poems—in contrast to the earnest and pedestrian verses that Jewel writes—also draw inspiration from violating what one might associate with poetry, refusing to take the poetic form seriously even as they seek to alter the reader's relationship to habituated forms of speech.³ R. Zamora Linmark's hard-to-define *Rolling the R's*, which is ostensibly about growing up gay and ethnically Filipino in Hawaii during the 1970s, is a mash-up of references to popular movies, television shows, songs, and fashions. The form itself is a blend of poetry and prose, some of which is written in pidgin.⁴ Likewise, *I-Hotel* is, like other works by Karen Tei Yamashita, self-conscious of the ways in which received forms fall short of helping it reach its narrative aspirations. The novel, if it can be called this, is broken up into ten shorter novellas, switches points of view, employs vernacular speech of various kinds, and includes drawings and a comic strip.⁵ Even in more seemingly conventional works, like Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction or the novels of Susan Choi, Monique Truong, Han Ong, and Chang-rae Lee, one finds a subtle but unmistakable commentary on their own form, a restless relationship to its traditions and a ceaseless search for another order of connection to its possible alternative pasts leading to more open presents. As Betsy Huang observes about Choi's *American Woman*, "Part historical fiction, part fugitive thriller, and part road narrative, the novel stitches together several genres to interrogate the narrative conventions that frame representations of social rebellion and the determination of 'justice.'"⁶

Such formal restlessness further heightens the complexity of the question that Ben asks in *Shortcomings*. What is “good” about any of this literature? While many of the most successful contemporary writers have usually gained their success by demonstrating an unusual degree of mastery over their craft, there is nevertheless an excess—even if this excess appears a too faithful adherence to a tradition—that challenges simple aesthetic pronouncements. A salient example: Chang-rae Lee’s novel *The Surrendered* was greeted by James Wood in the *New Yorker* as “commendably ambitious, extremely well written, powerfully moving in places, and, alas, utterly conventional. . . . Many of these scenes are piercingly evoked, and the novel is so spacious in design and reach, so sensitive to historical catastrophe, that it seems churlish to bridle. Yet in the aggregate this slabbed magnificence seems, if not melodramatic, then certainly stagy, even bookish, a livid libretto, something made for the novel rather than made by it.”⁷ What is notable about this judgment is how it seems blind to the ways in which *The Surrendered* does exactly what Wood bemoans it doesn’t. In its apparently conventional use of realist narrative devices, it undermines their reality-making effect by being overtly stagy. As Lee observes in an interview conducted as part of the research for this book: “It seems on the surface that there’s a lot of realism going on, but actually at the end, the feeling that I wanted to leave with is not that you felt that you were really in that place, but that you were transported into a very real feeling and emotion. That’s why I would use the word ‘operatic,’ because in opera everything is heightened, and the action builds, and then it gets to a point at which something’s got to break.”⁸ Readers of *The Surrendered* might also note how the novel borrows not only from an exalted form like opera but from the more lowly forms of genre fiction, from noir and crime to the superhero. The novel might even contain an homage to Patricia Highsmith’s *The Talented Mr. Ripley*.

This book also begins with a discussion of *Shortcomings* because it raises a question that critics of Asian American literature have been addressing in various guises. Namely, what purpose does calling a work of literature Asian American serve at the present moment? That is, to put this point perhaps a bit too sharply (and confining it to a debate within Asian American literary circles rooted in its particular developmental history), should reading, writing, and the study of literature be political acts? Should these activities seek to critique coercive ideologies and contribute to novel ways of seeing the world that are potentially more liberating than the ones ex-

tant today?⁹ Or should reading, writing, and study treat this literature primarily as what Sue-Im Lee calls “aesthetic objects—objects that are constituted by and through deliberate choices in form, genres, traditions, and conventions?”¹⁰ And indeed if this literature is no longer one focused self-consciously on politics, then does it also make sense to keep using a term like *Asian American* to describe it? This term, after all, names a racially based political project that began as politicoeconomic critique and aspirations for alternative social formations, and may therefore appear from another vantage point to be a hindrance to the making of aesthetic objects.

As Christopher Lee points out, those within Asian American literary circles who have turned to aesthetics—a move this book participates in—do so with a great deal more nuance than Ben does in *Shortcomings*, so as not to make this an either-or choice.¹¹ One can be equally attentive to politics and to the making of art. Nevertheless, the very fact that some critics have sought to stake out a position explicitly critical of the reading practices of earlier critics suggests there remains an important tension between politics and aesthetics in the interpretation of Asian American literature. One concrete consequence of this tension is a greater willingness among critics to consider whether it makes sense to give up on the term *Asian American* altogether. In trying to understand this move toward aesthetics, however, it is important not to confuse cause and effect. It is *not* the case that a rising interest in aesthetics is leading some critics to question the value of the overtly political and by extension of the term *Asian American*. Rather, the debate over what mix of politics and aesthetics should inform the practice of Asian American literature might better be thought of as symptomatic of an underlying tension around the term *Asian American* itself, which repeatedly falls short of its founding movement’s aspirations at a time of mounting hostility toward open discussions about race. It is the uncertainty around the term and its political valence that has given critical force to aesthetics as a domain worthy of greater independent attention.

For the more politically minded, the term feels limiting, making commitments to a narrow band of liberal position-taking that is not faithful to the greater struggles for wholesale societal change that once energized those who had initially organized under its banner. It has, instead, turned into a synonym for an ethnic way of thinking that owes more intellectual debt to the Chicago school of sociology than to a tradition of racial solidarity-making among Asians in America and a necessary attentiveness

to structural issues.¹² For the more aesthetically minded, the term is also limiting, failing as it does to grant authors and cultural producers of various kinds the opportunity to pursue their creative impulses freely. In valuing the political overmuch, Asian American literary studies as a whole has failed to appreciate the ideological heterogeneity of its population of cultural producers.¹³ The beginning of *Shortcomings* brings this tension to the foreground in as forceful a way as possible. It asserts that even in a community of culture producers and consumers outside the network of a formal academic setting this tension remains a live concern.

Finally, this book begins with a discussion of *Shortcomings* because it highlights how a restless relationship to form and uncertainty about the purpose of literature are connected to the meaning of race for Asian Americans. A few panels after Ben berates Miko about the film's failures, a visual detail pokes fun at the play of expectations that is set in motion by these comments. In a panel meant to establish where the next part of the story is taking place, a drawing of a building's exterior features a restaurant's name in big lettering: "Crepe Expectations" (fig. intro.2).¹⁴ This pun obviously belongs to the surfeit of kitschy advertisements in which daily life is awash, which suggests that Ben struggles with how the film he had seen the previous evening might be connected to this kind of commercial come-on. Ben tells the friend he meets at the restaurant that what he objects to most about his argument with Miko is how she connected him to the film. As he puts it, "I just hate that she has to take a conversation about some stupid movie and turn it into a personal attack on me."¹⁵ As an example of Asian American literature, broadly defined (although the focus of this book will primarily be on fiction and poetry), the film represents to Ben what is common and uninspiring about the world he lives in. It also raises the fear that Ben himself might be implicated in such a narrative. Thus, one reason that politics and aesthetics in Asian American literature can stir as much debate as they do is that literature as an important purveyor of narratives about Asian Americans frequently acts as a reflection of a person's relative worth. No matter how much one might decry such reading habits as unsophisticated, one can't separate representations from the ways in which representations mediate how others understand one and how one understands oneself.

It is precisely because literature can seem so personal to raced subjects like Asian Americans that the race of the author, the race of the characters it focuses on, and the racial nature of the themes it develops are such in-



Figure intro.2.

Detail from Adrian Tomine's *Shortcomings*. The pun of the restaurant's name suggests a metonymic link between kitsch and personhood.

tense objects of scrutiny in both scholarly and lay discussions. One might say that neither focusing on formal restlessness nor questioning what purposes literature can serve produces much that is unique to Asian American literature. Such emphases can obviously be understood as being applicable to the routine operations of contemporary literature as a whole. To put this point more sharply, any literary work being written today worthy of attention struggles precisely with its received forms and with the purpose it seeks to serve. And yet it seems too quick a jump from this observation to the insistence that there is nothing particularly racial about the ways in which the authors mentioned above, and discussed in the rest of this book, struggle with these questions. To assert this would be tantamount to arguing that the term Asian American has outlived its usefulness and that race itself has lost its meaningfulness in both the study and writing of literature.

It would also be to accede to the implicit logic that there is something innately parochial, because raced, about Asian American literature that isn't true of American literature, by which many critics seem to mean a small number of championed white writers studied alongside one or two token minority writers. If the distinction between Asian American literature and American literature seems to collapse, it may be less because the former is vanishing into the latter and more that the latter is in a process of reinvention and requires something like the former as an impor-

tant model. In other words, if contemporary American literature is marked by formal restlessness and a questioning of its purpose, it is because it is being forced to respond to pressures with which Asian American literature as a whole has for some time been contending. One does not read and study Asian American literature to understand only Asian Americans. One also does so to understand American literature in its expansive plasticity and its potential for constant renewal.

The Creative Potential of Race

The Children of 1965 is about a generation of writers who have largely been born since the mid-1960s and who are in the process of making a substantial mark on American literature. The writers this book calls attention to are part of the largest and most celebrated cohort of American writers of Asian ancestry ever to exist, which also means that the study of this literature has wide-ranging significance for the whole of contemporary American literature. As Cynthia Sau-Ling Wong observed when this cohort was just starting to become visible, the year 1991 is an “annus mirabilis” for “it witnessed the appearance of an extraordinary number of well-received books, some of them debuts for first-timers, others representing new directions of established authors.”¹⁶ If 1991 was indeed a year of miracles, what makes it doubly miraculous is how its accomplishments have been dwarfed by the productivity and success of the writers who published their works in the decades that followed.

A survey of ten prominent literary awards given to American writers — the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction, the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry, the National Book Award in Fiction, the National Book Award in Poetry, the National Book Award in Nonfiction, the National Book Critics Circle Award in Fiction, PEN/Faulkner, PEN/Hemingway, the Yale Younger Poet Series, and the Barnard Women Poets Prize — compactly conveys this fact (table intro.1). It reveals that Asian Americans have won these awards seventeen times, almost all of them since the mid-1990s. Most of the honorees were under forty when they won their respective prizes, with most having been born after the mid-1960s. This may explain why the PEN/Hemingway can boast the most Asian American honorees, as this award is given only to first books of fiction. This may also explain why Asian American poets, who have fared poorly as award winners when compared to their fiction-

Table intro.1.

Asian American Winners of Ten Major Literature Awards

YEAR

1981	Maxine Hong Kingston's <i>China Men</i> , National Book Award in General Nonfiction
1986	Cathy Song's <i>Picture Bride</i> , Yale Younger Poet Award
1996	Chang-rae Lee's <i>Native Speaker</i> , PEN/Hemingway Award
1997	Ha Jin's <i>Ocean of Words</i> , PEN/Hemingway Award
1998	Bharati Mukherjee's <i>Middleman and Other Stories</i> , National Book Critics Circle Award
1999	Ai's <i>Vice: New and Selected Poems</i> , National Book Award in Poetry
2000	Jhumpa Lahiri's <i>Interpreter of Maladies</i> , Pulitzer Prize in Fiction, PEN/Hemingway Award
2001	Akhil Sharma's <i>An Obedient Father</i> , PEN/Hemingway Award Ha Jin's <i>Waiting</i> , National Book Award in Fiction, PEN/Faulkner Award, Finalist for Pulitzer Prize in Fiction.
2003	Sabina Murray's <i>The Caprices</i> , PEN/Faulkner Award
2004	Susan Choi's <i>American Woman</i> , Finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction
2005	Ha Jin's <i>War Trash</i> , National Book Award in Fiction, PEN/Faulkner Award, Finalist for Pulitzer Prize in Fiction. Yiyun Lee's <i>A Thousand Years of Good Prayers</i> , PEN/Hemingway Award Cathy Park Hong's <i>Dance Dance Revolution</i> , Barnard Women Poets Prize
2006	Kiran Desai's <i>Inheritance of Loss</i> , National Book Critics Circle Award
2008	Maxine Hong Kingston, National Book Award's Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters
2010	Ken Chen's <i>Juvenilia</i> , Yale Younger Poet Award

The majority of the awards were conferred in the past two decades.

writing peers, have had volumes selected as part of the Yale Younger Poet Series twice (none of them has won a Pulitzer or a National Book Critics Circle Award in poetry). In addition, since the mid-1990s Asian Americans have published literary works at an unprecedented rate. As one small marker of this expanding productivity, the number of nominees for the Asian American Writers Workshop's literature awards for books published in 2008 is revealing: fifteen books in nonfiction, twenty-two in poetry, and twenty-five in fiction.¹⁷ These numbers would have been simply unthinkable a few decades ago, no matter how capaciously one defined the term Asian American.

Surveying these works, this book argues that there is something particularly Asian American about them, even as this literature might slip past such critical boundaries or challenge their configuration. In building its case, the book also makes a series of claims that run the gamut from the obvious to the controversial. To those who insist that the United States has arrived at a historical moment that exists beyond the divisiveness of race, what follows responds that race continues to divide—even as it might, paradoxically, bring together in original ways. The book claims that race also continues to organize social experiences, to set limits to cultural expression, and, just as important, to inspire creativity. It calls attention to the ways in which Asian Americans bring their constitutive histories, characteristic concerns, and heterogeneous perspectives to bear on the writing of contemporary American literature as a whole. Finally, it asserts that, far from being parochial, the study of Asian American literature is a study of American literature's future, not in the sense it somehow leads the way to what's next but in the sense that it represents what is already imminent to American literature that pulls its creativity forward in time.

Whether the writers discussed herein realize it or not, whether they want it or not, their ability to cope with, and even to thrive on, the onrush of racial expectations that saturates their work gives the literature they write a special vibrancy. As a result, race more often than not turns out to be a source of creativity in the pages these writers are producing. Indeed, to think of such a diverse collection of ethnic groups and individual histories as comprising a single racial category, as the term Asian American does, is already to call attention to an act of profound creativity. It is no easy task for the imagination to look at a population as diverse as the one called into being by the term Asian American and see in that population shared experiences, common causes, and structural affinities. In such

an instance, race is not a preexistent condition, but is being actively produced.

Hence, this book seeks to recuperate the idea of Asian American creative expression from the narrow way in which Ben at the start of *Shortcomings* defines it. While there certainly are narratives that conform to a fairly convention-bound idea about what stories and poems about Asian Americans should be like, the majority of the works discussed in this book refuse this idea. And by refusing, these works help their readers think imaginatively about what the near future holds for a country on the cusp of dramatic changes to its demographic composition, geopolitical prominence, and environmental well-being. Unavoidably, the project this book undertakes is potentially convention-setting. In arguing that Asian American literature is at its best when it refuses conventions and helps readers see their past, present, and future in dramatically different ways, the book also asserts these are the qualities that make some works of literature Asian American. As it attempts to demonstrate the ways in which Asian American creative expression does not have to be convention-bound, and in fact is especially interesting and worth reading when it isn't, it thereby suggests boundaries about what it should be. There is no way around this conundrum except in the struggle against it—a constant overcoming of boundaries that creates their own boundaries that must in turn be overcome.

What this book does is locate Asian American creative expression in the struggle itself, something already encoded in its formal restlessness. Asian American literature is a perpetual-motion machine that continuously turns out fictive narratives, poetic visions, life stories, bits of insight, flashes of brilliance, and moments of dangerous reflection. It is certainly the case that to describe Asian American literature as a machine is to conjure a long history of associating the Asian with the machine-like, but it does little good simply to repudiate this association. What is more interesting is to embrace it and in the process to redefine the machine to show how it is not incommensurate with the human. The two are bound together, occupying a zone of indeterminacy that continually coproduce, and reproduce, each other as concepts.

As the opening example suggests, however, many Americans of Asian ancestry, writers not least among them, find it difficult to think of a bureaucratic category like Asian American (a mechanical term, if there ever was one) as anything so dynamic. Far from a call for inventiveness, the

term seems to put people into a neat box. It's no surprise, therefore, that many writers might not only refuse the conventions that seem to bound-ary Asian American literature, but might also refuse to be called an Asian American altogether. It is a label that is affixed too haphazardly onto one's person. It lacks flow, beauty, familiar self-identification. To say "I am an Asian American" does not lend itself easily to conversation. Rather, it trips up the tongue in an ungainly manner, arrests attention, and seems to force an issue that always requires further clarification. It is so much easier to say, "I am Hmong," "I am Laotian," "I am Cambodian," "I am Sri Lankan," "I am Vietnamese," "I am Pakistani," "I am Indian," "I am Taiwanese," "I am Burmese," "I am Chinese," "I am Japanese," "I am Filipino," "I am Korean," "I am Thai," and so on. These ways of self-identifying would at least have the advantage of ethnicity, which compared to the racial term Asian American is comfortingly concrete and immediately graspable. Such self-identifications are also more accommodating and less prone to confrontation. Moreover, what trips the tongue up most is the addition of the "American" either to Asian or a specific Asian ethnic designation. The noun sounds forced, irrelevant to a primary identifier that makes what follows seem either an afterthought or even a contradiction. Indeed, the addition of "American" adds a layer of historical consciousness, asking one to consider what has happened in the past that the geographical regions named in conjunction should strike one as being so improbably forced.

Asian American also has an opposing problem: in purporting to be representative of all of these ethnicities located within a specific host country, its expansiveness excludes as much as it includes. What about those who are indigenous to the Pacific Islands? Or those who can trace their ancestry to South Asia or West Asia (what is primarily known in the U.S. as the Middle East), when Asia itself is so often understood in the United States to refer only to the countries of East Asia? Or those who don't think of themselves as Americans? Or those who live in Canada and Latin America, who are also Americans in the broadest sense of this word? In response to such questions, several alternatives have been floated as more descriptive of a vastly heterogeneous population. These include Asian Pacific Islander American, South Asian American (as a complementary term to Asian American), Asian Diaspora, Asian/American, and Asian North American. From a writer's point of view, all of these possible self-descriptors must exacerbate rather than alleviate the problem the writer may have with a term like Asian American. Each is more technical and bureaucratic than the

former. They are what a committee might come up with to cover all contingencies. They say nothing about lived experiences, about finding just the right word to convey an inchoate sensation or thought, or about maintaining narrative momentum. Simply put, they are all soulless. What might therefore be critically indispensable, especially as any critical enterprise must seek precision as a mark of its rigor, will seem to creative writers as impediments to their work.

A gulf thus appears to exist between the professional writer, who above all else might want to preserve his or her right to create in as unencumbered way as possible, and the professional reader, especially one who values an approach to reading that rejects the idea that literature exists in its own tightly contained rarified sphere. But, when scrutinized, this gulf might turn out to be smaller than it at first appeared. While creative writers might not favor using a term like Asian American (or its more inclusive alternatives) and may even reject this term outright as a descriptor of who they are and what they do, they nonetheless do respond to the same set of concerns that mobilizes critics of their work. That is, they are equally interested in making creative sense of forces that critics seek to understand in the most innovative and rigorous ways possible: How are people with ancestry from Asia perceived and treated in this country? How might such perceptions change? What would it mean to lead a full life without denying parts of oneself, such as one's Asian ancestry, that others don't seem to value or value in a way that feels discomfiting? What are the obligations one owes to others who are less fortunate, or excluded by conceptualizations of the self? What does it mean to lead a good life? What is an ethical way to think of oneself in the world? What does justice look like, and for whom? What kind of future does one want to help create?

What makes creative writers different, however, is that they struggle more with a racial designation that critics and those in other fields (such as history, sociology, psychology, policy-making, law) more easily accept as a necessary part of what they do. Indeed, those who actively question whether critics should find another term to organize their thinking do so in the interests of finding a way to organize their thinking more adequately or at the very least to be more flexible to accommodate dynamically changing social, political, economic, and cultural circumstances. Perhaps many writers are wary of racial designation because they perceive any such designation, no matter how flexible, as limiting their freedom to imagine what they want. Or perhaps they are wary because a racial designation like

Asian American seems to come from the world of academia and government and business, and therefore to threaten a pursuit that defines itself as opposed to such institutional and compromised ways of thinking. Or perhaps resistance to being labeled comes from working in a field dominated by assemblages of creative-writing programs, talent agents, editors, and marketing departments that relentlessly seek to commodify all that is different about a writer and that is thus also compromised in a way a writer might want to work against. Or perhaps such resistance emerges because writers, precisely in being writers, are intimately aware of the ways in which representation seems always to be invading personhood. For whatever reason, many of the writers interviewed for this book were reluctant to be called Asian American writers or accepted the designation only with great ambivalence. Some, however, accepted it as an important descriptor of what they were trying to do with their writing, thereby granting themselves the freedom to do what they wished under its aegis and thus finding the freedom they yearned for in a term that other writers saw as limiting.

By either resisting or acceding to this description, these writers remain engaged in actively redefining what it means to be an Asian American. By vacillating between writing and not writing as an Asian American, these writers work within a space of tense creativity that reflects a national unease about the question of race and the many other concerns about an uncertain future that race signifies. When asked whether she considers herself an Asian American writer, Susan Choi responded, “Yes and no. I do have a particular interest in the lives of Asians in this country, and at the same time I don’t as a writer feel like that’s my writing identity.” Such ambivalence about the question of how to identify oneself acts as a kind of necessary friction to creative work. Because Asian American writers in particular, for whatever reason, seem troubled by their racial entanglements, they draw from these entanglements to produce something innovative, fascinating, and richly complex. Even when their works stumble and are uneven, disappointing, or unsatisfying—as they can be—these works are nevertheless usually worth the time it takes to read and to think deeply about. What makes these works rewarding is that they are fueled by an ambivalence about race that gestures toward, and may even correspond with, the uncertainty the reader feels about the future. In responding to the question “What purpose does calling this literature Asian American serve?,” this book proposes that the very contentiousness of this question

is fuel for greater creativity. Without restrictions, there can be little call for acts of transgression. Without boundaries, there can be few opportunities for boundary-crossing. Without a set of expectations to guide and limit what a writer can write, there can be no striving for a horizon that endlessly and necessarily and often pleasurably eludes one's grasp.

The Pleasures of Deep Reading

One might wonder, why begin a book about such a large and expanding topic by focusing on a single literary work? Surely there are many examples one can draw from that would enrich this discussion. And by selecting only one work to examine closely it is possible that the work was selected because it happens to fit what this book is arguing, and allows its author to ignore other examples that might not fit so neatly into its interpretive framework. These are valid criticisms that the rest of this book addresses by drawing on as large a number of examples as possible. Just as important as breadth, however, is careful attention to individual texts, something which movements toward a more quantitative approach to literary study risks eschewing.¹⁸ In making sense of how writers struggle with racial expectations, in particular, it is important to maintain the particularities of their individual writings at the center of attention even as what is being considered is the sweep of contemporary Asian American literature's prodigious productivity. Such attentiveness helps avoid the kind of reductionism that racial expectations can enforce, so that a study of this kind does not simply end up duplicating the exact set of phenomena that writers find themselves struggling against.

In addition, much can be learned by such attentiveness, or what might more descriptively be called *deep reading*. This involves reading every word and image, lingering over details, savoring the many permutations of meaning that a piece of writing offers, and allowing oneself to consider how these meanings are formed in relation to concerns outside the text. It is highly subjective, but also discerning of what is on the page. It is synthetic in the sense that no reader reads without a knowledge of other works and of a world that contains them in specific times and places and bodies. The developmental psychologist Maryanne Wolf has argued that the human brain is not intrinsically designed for reading, but has gradually taken on this task through a historically long process of cultural development. What this means is that each individual must learn the task of

reading, starting from early stages of exposure to the written word where one becomes aware that images on a page have meaning and correspond to spoken words. More advanced developmental stages automate what for the early reader is a slow and self-conscious process, so that the brain of an advanced reader can decode printed words in milliseconds, leaving the mind several more milliseconds to contemplate what it has encountered. This is what Wolf calls “the secret gift of time to think that lies at the core of the reading brain’s design.”¹⁹

While related to close reading, deep reading seeks to get beyond the formalism that the former term connotes. As Wolf suggests, deep reading seeks to do more than to make sense of the words that are there on the page. It also tries to connect these words with questions that lead to the world beyond. One can’t savor the meanings of a work of literature without also seeing how these meanings are produced in conversation with what’s happening all around oneself. By asking one to slow down, even if by the milliseconds that digital media in their immediacy and distractedness often do not allow, print literature affords a space of contemplation from which one can reengage with a world that can otherwise be too immersive. That is, the world created by digital media can be so completely engrossing of one’s attention that one can continue without realizing it to see in the same way over and over, mistaking that repetition as simply the most rational way to understand the world. As the narrator’s mother in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warrior* put it, “The difference between mad people and sane people . . . is that sane people have variety when they talk-story. Mad people have only one story that they talk over and over.”²⁰ Deep reading, which is only possible after a long engagement with the printed word, draws one outward to what exists beyond the page so as to be better able to reengage it and to imagine it anew—to attain some sense of its potential, and in this way to remain sane when so many others seem to be completely mad. One might therefore say that deep reading allows the reader to make worlds rather than simply to accept the world as it is given, precut, prepackaged, tired in its rutted ways of seeing.

Deep reading is also different from critical reading, which suggests an aggressive interrogation of the text, a searching for ideological incongruity and contradictions of thought that is brought to the surface through a rubbing against the grain of what is written on the page. While this is certainly an important intellectual activity, it sometimes fails to appreciate, and even encourages one to look with suspicion on, the many pleasures

that literature can yield to the careful reader. The literary text is unique in that it calls for deep reading. One of its chief pleasures is that the reading practice it elicits is unlike the instrumental forms of reading encountered on a daily basis (newspapers, magazines, blogs, and so on) when one is more often than not scanning for content and trying simply to get the gist of what is there as quickly as one can. In contrast, literature encourages one to slow down. In slowing down, one must interrogate the text. But one must also not only interrogate. One must enjoy it, find pleasure in it, or it ceases to be literature and becomes miserably indistinguishable from the mass of other writings that inundate one's days. To keep literature literature as such, one must be able to articulate what one finds worth savoring about it. Only by opening oneself up to such pleasure can a reader discover what critical reading alone may foreclose.

So, in the name of deep reading, this introduction returns to where it began—to a discussion of *Shortcomings* and the question of politics and aesthetics. Deep reading benefits from literary texts that are capable of rewarding the attentive reader and that as a result might side with those who favor aesthetic appreciation over political concerns. But even if it does, deep reading must also take into account the ways in which what defines “good” literature, as Ben might put it, is complex, mixing instrumental modes of reading with belletristic practices. It must also recognize that the literary text is itself varied, so that it cannot be limited to a few celebrated works or even simply to works in the medium of prose and verse.

In language that Ben would surely find fitting, for example, one might say that the film that opens *Shortcomings* seeks nakedly to trade on its ethnic and racial difference from mainstream cinema. If it critiques the desire to make a lot of money, it nevertheless strives for an alternative form of capital accumulation in the realm of culture. It seeks to attain the prestige produced by the machinery of the Asian American film festival that can compensate, if poorly, for its being left out of the circuits of economic capital that enliven the national and global trade of cinematic material. Analogous to the kind of labor performed in the aging fortune-cookie factory (where the final scene of the film takes place), the film itself is engaged in a form of highly ethnicized work, producing products for a narrowly defined enclave economy. What seems to conjure the most disgust for Ben is how satisfied the filmmaker and the audience members are in accepting such meager compensation, applauding a kind of good that in another context would have been panned as not very good. Market ex-

pectations are low because narratives by and about Asian Americans have relatively little prestige where it counts—in precisely the same way that a fortune cookie has cachet only when served at the end of a meal at a Chinese restaurant. What gets celebrated within its small enclave would be considered weak, bland, and uninteresting in a broader context. All of this highlights for Ben the ways in which being Asian American has little value, so that any narrative attention given to Asian Americans must, by definition, be undeserving of such sustained attention.²¹

In response to this disgust and as a way perhaps to distance himself from becoming part of its object, Ben argues for a uniqueness that can transcend what is degraded about such a racially defined art form. In doing so, he enacts a recognizable modernist maneuver in his desire for a postracial form of storytelling. Unfortunately for Ben, his occupation as a manager of a local movie theater undermines this maneuver. Ben's job reminds the reader that there are dominant forms of narrative that willfully announce their complicity with the desire to make money, that follow conventions as banal as the ones on display in the opening page of *Shortcomings*, and that actively exclude the range of persons and compress the range of possible types of persons that can be embodied onscreen. Tomine's book undercuts Ben's modernist maneuver in another way when it depicts a fight that Ben has with Miko after the latter finds his collection of pornographic films. This revelation accentuates the other qualities of his character that make Ben a suspect spokesperson for a modernist appreciation of aesthetic value. He is querulous, unsatisfied, emotionally stunted, and in a host of other ways unlikable. He is not a figure a reader is likely going to want to identify with. So one senses that Ben is perhaps a kind of antihero: the reader follows along not because he or she agrees with him or wants him to succeed in his exploits, but to find out what makes him tick.

Regardless of how the reader might feel about him, Ben's aesthetic claim, made so forcibly at the start, requires careful thought, if only because it allows one to appreciate the contradictions of such a claim. That Ben feels the need to keep his stash of pornographic films a secret suggests how it is not something that easily coexists with his aesthetic claims. It is precisely because of the apparent glaring contradiction between Ben's disdain for Asian American independent filmmaking and his enjoyment of usually even more amateurish pornographic films that Ben is able to embody how consumers make contradictory demands on the art of story-

telling. The storyteller as belletristic artist is at once expected to occupy a plane of expression that is unimpeded by mundane concerns like popularity or making money, and often even to disdain such concerns. Simultaneously, such an artist is supposed to anchor whatever case for relevance his or her art might have to universal appeal. In other words, the story being told must have the ability to connect with as large an audience as possible. Indeed, the audience has to be large enough, to put this point a little circularly, to make a work popular and its author rich—an instrumental way of defining the good. One might say therefore that making a good movie, and by extension writing a good story, is never as simple as Ben originally makes it out to be, for what is good does not exist on its own Platonic plane. It is routed through expectations about what will sell and about who the audience will be, as well as how the author defines the goals of his or her artistic endeavor. Racial-aesthetic expectations, post-racial modernist-aesthetic expectations, and racially tinged market expectations besiege Asian American writers and cultural producers. Ben makes visible in his contradictory responses how difficult it is to pick his way through these competing demands. The fact that these responses are being staged in the medium of comics, which has until recently had little cultural capital as literature, makes more salient the reader's awareness of how slippery and embedded in time—such as a present moment that is witness to heightened critical appreciation of this medium as suitable for serious storytelling—any definition of good literature can be.

As the conflict between Ben and Miko highlights, such expectations also exacerbate their romantic relationship. What upsets Miko most about the pornographic films she finds—she is notably silent about the form itself—is their relentless objectification of white women. As she puts it, “Do you have any idea why this might offend me? It’s like you’re obsessed with the typical western media beauty ideal, but you’re settling for me.”²² Just as in art, the choice of romantic partners in this work is caught up in a system of racial valuation that limits the appeal of what it means to be Asian American, even if someone like Ben insists race has nothing to do with romance. The rest of the narrative of *Shortcomings* explores this tension as Miko moves to New York to take up an internship opportunity. In her absence, Ben romantically pursues two different white women, with disappointing results. As the disappointments mount, he learns that Miko has lied. There was no internship. She moved to New York so she could be with another man, who, according to Ben, is white. When confronted,

Miko insists that he is not: “He’s half Jewish, half Native American.”²³ In the wake of this discovery (which revolves around the slipperiness of whiteness even as the narration insists racial hypocrisy is self-evident), when his only friend Alice Kim asks, “Now am I finally allowed to talk shit about her?,” Ben responds with unusual generosity, “No, don’t. Look . . . we all have our reasons.”²⁴

These are the last words spoken in *Shortcomings*. They evoke the kinds of compromises everyone must make in negotiating the expectations that race in particular generates. After these words are uttered, the story falls into silence, with the drawings taking over the heavy work of conveying Ben’s lonely departure from the apartment now inhabited by Alice, where she is asleep in the arms of her lover, his walk through airport security, and his literally endless plane ride back to a home where he has no friend or loved one left. In his final conversation with Alice, who has just announced her decision to stay in New York to live with her girlfriend, Ben admits his desire for deferral. He is unwilling to grow up just for the sake of growing up, and he refuses to embrace change because change is always happening: “You know, there’s still a part of me that thinks when I land in Oakland, everything will just be . . . back to normal. . . . You’ll be back in school. . . . Miko will be waiting for me at the airport.”²⁵ The final panels, six all together, depict Ben looking forlornly outside a small porthole, the outlines of the airport and the city giving way to clouds, and then a white blankness (fig. intro.3). Nothing else is different about these panels except the scenery outside the window.

The visual placement of Ben’s body looking outward at the passing world thus recalls the static arrangement of bodies that the book’s first page depicted. This time, however, the lack of movement, even more noticeable than in the opening page, does not figure the banal or trite, and definitively refuses any gesture of subjective arrival. Instead, it evokes an intensity of focus on a voiding of expectations, a subtle reminder that even in the stillness of his body Ben is, in fact, in motion. The quiet, poignant moment of reflection created by this static arrangement of panels with their subtle differences—the world standing still while the airplane moves through the air, the body perfectly still as the world rushes past—beautifully expresses how little Ben has to look forward to. Ben’s relationship to the future is one of dread and fear. These panels also model the kind of pose a reader might assume after having taken his or her time to read *Shortcomings* deeply. If expectations are a problem for contemporary



Figure intro.3.

Detail from Adrian Tomine's *Shortcomings*. Contemplation as a stillness in motion.

Asian American writers, as *The Children of 1965* argues, they are a problem both because there are too many of them, which weighs heavily on the lives they write about and on the forms of their writing, and because, as Ben confronts in these final panels, there are also too few.

At the same time, the ending is not entirely bleak. Or, it might be more accurate to say the ending exceeds the constraints of thinking in terms of optimism and pessimism, or of hope and dread. Instead, it figures a present and a future inextricably knotted together, a temporal immanence that conveys what can best be described as a becoming. A becoming is a perpetually ongoing process of arrival, waiting, being in a state of suspension, motion and stillness, or a stillness found in motion. Likewise, the

work of the writer as an Asian American—to write with race in mind or as a starting place—is at its most engaging a restless endeavor, a deliberate dislodging of being for a becoming that ceaselessly searches out lines of flight, a movement that seeks to break free from constrained and habituated patterns of thought. The philosopher Gilles Deleuze, who more than anyone in recent memory has helped to make this sense of the word *becoming* resonate as it does in contemporary literary studies, could very well have had these drawings in mind, could very well have been thinking about Asian American literature, when he observed, “We sometimes congratulate writers, but they know that they are far from having achieved their becoming, far from having attained the limit they set for themselves, which ceaselessly slips away from them.”²⁶

Impositions and Lines

What follows is divided into two parts for the sake of clarity. The chapters in the first part, entitled “Impositions of Form,” address what it means to write as an Asian American and how expectations that writers of Asian ancestry working in the United States will do so impinges on the work they produce. Chapter 1 launches this investigation by focusing on the topic of expectations, which animates the theoretical concerns of this book. It explores how expectations can help address the issue of change, and how literature in particular is an important, and distinct, discursive space for exploring this issue. Chapter 2 builds on these theoretical meditations by comparing ideas of writing that formed during a time in the early 1970s when many Asians in America began to think of themselves as Asian Americans in the crucible of popular political activism with those commonly expressed by younger writers writing in the present. It focuses on the ways in which the trope of the lost manuscript has haunted the origins of Asian American literature as a symbol of experiences whose stories have been lost, from Sui Sin Far’s missing book to John Okada’s burned novel. It emphasizes how the lost manuscript operates differently in contemporary works, such as in Kingston’s *Fifth Book of Peace*.

Chapter 3 examines works by Asian Americans who either actively wrestle with what it means to be an ethnic writer or who refuse altogether to broach this subject, mainly by focusing on non-Asian American characters. It draws on an interview conducted with Sabina Murray to set the stage for readings of two especially salient works that draw attention to the

question of what it means to write, or not write, ethnic literature. The first is Nam Le's short story "Love and Honor and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice," which more than any other recent example tackles directly in narrative form what it means to be a writer of literature of Asian ancestry in the United States—and in doing so turns the trope of the lost manuscript once more. This is a struggle that is acutely relevant for Le, who grew up in Australia and had resided in the United States for only a short time when the story was published. The second is Ed Park's *Personal Days*, which at first appears to be completely uninterested in the question of ethnic literature, yet reveals at the same time sharp insights into the ways in which race operates in a novel. The chapter ends with a short discussion of Ted Chiang's works of science fiction.

With the help of Brian Ascalon Roley's *American Son* and Susan Choi's *American Woman*, chapter 4 focuses on why the word *American* creeps so often into the titles of works by Asian Americans, noting, among other things, the ways in which the word points directly to a national fixation on an individuality that associates a liberal personhood with a freedom from racial association. This chapter seeks to make sense of how the individuality imagined in these novels might not equate to the one imagined by neoliberalism, seeking in this way to consider how novels like Roley's and Choi's might be doing the difficult cultural work of imagining a personhood that is not reducible to nation, to ethnicity, or to individual self-possession.

"Lines of Flight," the second part of this book, concentrates attention on how contemporary Asian American writers help envision a near future inextricably tied to tumultuous forces—demographic changes, geopolitical restructuring, environmental catastrophe—already at work in the present. Chapter 5 begins by asking whether Asian Americans are a racial minority. It addresses this question by focusing on comics as a medium that allows writers to contest a visual history of race thinking, and in particular on the work of Gene Luen Yang. *American Born Chinese*, Yang's most ambitious work to date, tests the boundaries of Michael Omi's and Howard Winant's paradigm-setting work on racial formation and challenges the thinking of its critics, including Walter Benn Michaels and Colleen Lye. Chapter 6 explores how Jhumpa Lahiri, one of the most acclaimed American writers of her generation, employs allegory to dramatize the anxieties surrounding demographic predictions that in the near future the United States will no longer be majority white. This literary maneuver allows her

fiction to focus on a specific population of Asian Americans—mainly professional, middle-class, and upper-middle-class Bengali immigrants and their children living along the Boston–New York corridor—without seeming at the same time to be too narrowly focused. Her characters are allowed to lead lives that are, in this way, worthy of her and her readers’ attention across the span of several major books.

By training attention on the work of the established writer Karen Tei Yamashita and the emerging writer Sonya Chung, chapter 7 anchors its investigation into the ways in which Asian American writers imagine how current geopolitical relations pegged to globalization are troubled by transnational relations of family, romance, and friendship. It considers how the use of multiple perspectives and nonlinear storytelling by these authors allow them to imagine a planetary, as opposed to a global, way of being together. Following the ecological bend that “becoming planetary” entails, the final chapter of this book turns to the issue of place, highlighting the ways in which Asian American writers like the poet Cathy Park Hong and the novelist Julie Otsuka set their work in the tropological richness of a desert landscape. They use this setting to consider the connections between widespread migration, the mingling of many languages, the possible suspension of the rule of law, and environmental degradation. This is powerfully true in Cathy Park Hong’s poem sequence *Dance Dance Revolution*, since it turns into poetry what Evelyn Ch’ien calls “weird English,” a mixing of languages into a pidgin or patois that acts as a potent source for literary creativity.²⁷ This is also true of Julie Otsuka’s *When the Emperor Was Divine*, which calls attention to the desert landscape that is at once ubiquitous and largely unremarked on in narratives about Japanese American wartime internment that the rest of this chapter considers.

All of these chapters, as well as this introduction, have been deliberately written in a third-person critical voice. This is the kind of prose many high school students are still trained to produce in their English classes and one that they will probably be told they no longer need to reproduce in college writing. Certainly, humanities professors themselves rarely write in the purely third person, and a growing number have also been experimenting, often in bold ways, with hybrid forms that collapse distinctions between autobiography and the critical essay. What might be lost in such a personalizing of scholarship? What might be gained by willfully not participating in such a personalizing? Writing purely in the third person implicitly highlights these questions.

To further emphasize this contrast, the conclusion suspends this book's counter-experiment in scholarly writing, to take a more personal approach to the questions raised by the book as a whole. By being written in the first person, the conclusion thus implicitly addresses the question, What is *gained* by combining scholarly work with autobiographical rumination? The conclusion seeks to be an example of such writing, and leaves discussion about its significance for elsewhere. What the conclusion does address explicitly is the case for the appeal, and the enduring importance, of the culture turn in literary studies made in the 1980s and 1990s, to which the personalization of scholarly writing is closely related. At the same time, it argues that the culture turn, in rejecting the logic of literary canonicity and great books, is in danger of viewing the literary work as a window into the world as it is. What the conclusion proposes is that readers should turn to literature as world-making, a subtly more literary way of connecting the text to what lies beyond its pages that sees literature as unique because it seeks to imagine what is *not yet*.

In composing these chapters, many literary works by Asian Americans published since 1990 were consulted as time allowed—over a hundred titles (see appendix). These works span genres, forms, and even mediums, ranging from fiction and poetry to life writing, creative nonfiction, and comics. The kind of work considered here was restricted to print culture in order to make the scope manageable. Novels dominate attention, as the form itself remains the most prestigious and most popular mode of expression in print literature. Asian American fiction writing has also dominated poetry in terms of sales and prizes, suggesting that the former has so far been more accessible to a general readership and taste-brokering class than the latter. Life writing has generally been kept in the background because it is so uniquely complex that it would require more space than is available here to investigate fully. Despite its bias for the novel, and for fiction more generally, this book has nevertheless sought to call special attention to some poetic works in the hopes of contributing to a growing body of scholarship that acknowledges the budding significance, and beauty, of Asian American poetry.

In addition, a series of original interviews with a wide range of authors has enabled an engagement with these authors as partners in conversations about their work. They are listed here alphabetically: Saher Alam, Alexander Chee, Susan Choi, Lawrence Minh-Bùi Davis, Gish Jen, Maxine Hong Kingston, Chang-rae Lee, Min Jin Lee, Gerald Maa, David Mura,

Sabina Murray, Ed Park, Brian Ascalon Roley, Ricco Siasoco, Monique Truong, and Karen Tei Yamashita. A wide range of criteria was employed to decide which authors to include in this list. Talking to writers of as many different Asian ethnic backgrounds as possible was a criterion. Another was talking to writers of diverse personal background and history irrespective of ethnicity: whether one was born in this country or immigrated here at a later stage in life, whether one came from a middle-class professional family or from a working-class family, whether one was later in one's life-cycle or still relatively young. Another was the desire to have a mix of writers who were well known, and even famous, and writers whose works appealed to smaller audiences or who were just starting out. While every effort was made to be as inclusive as possible, some of the writers invited to participate in these discussions were unable or unwilling to do so; thus, one more addition to the list of criteria is the author's availability or willingness to be interviewed. While some of the interviews conducted for this book did not lend themselves to direct quotation, all of them have substantially informed the thinking that has gone into the composition of this book's argument. Talking with these writers is a lot like reading their works. It can be an exciting endeavor, funny and thought-provoking at times, frustrating at others, but always full of a generosity that is a key feature of the literature they are collectively writing.