

Introduction to Volume Six: An Identity Rebus

The essays in this volume of *Asian American Literature: Discourses & Pedagogies* share some surprisingly overlapping themes, even though this is not a thematically focused special issue. They examine the importance of place, from Chinatown as depicted by Sui Sin Far (Porter) to the liminal spaces between both class and ethnic cultures as described by Elaine Mar (Aguilar). They examine life writing in its various forms, from the almost impossible task presented to Korean adoptees in piecing together their pasts (Wills), to the story of coming of age between two cultures as experienced by Elaine Mar (Aguilar) and Amy Tan (Kevra). They also explore the uses we make of food in our efforts to define ourselves and our place within cultures (Aguilar, Kevra, Wills). These interlocking themes of location, food, and identity inspired the use of the cover image.

In the last six years of running this journal, the editorial board and I have tended to favor abstract covers to avoid the inevitable difficulties of visually representing the diverse communities engaged by the texts analyzed within our articles. At the same time, we have received a variety of articles from contributors around the world, including essays analyzing or looking at the pedagogical impact of comparing Asian and American texts (such as a very interesting one comparing Indian poetry and the work of Elizabeth Bishop) as if Asian and American were two separate terms rather than a compound term describing one identity. While we have been loath to narrowly define what we mean by “Asian American” literature and culture, we have generally felt confident that, to paraphrase Justice Stewart, “we know it when we see it.” But how to signify “Asian American” without offering a too narrow or stagnant definition? Inspired by the texts analyzed in this volume which focus on the interconnection of place and food with self-definitions of identity, the cover acts as a kind of playful rebus, a visual representation of the concept “Asian American” or American Asian, using some of the most iconic or even stereotypic images possible: American muscle cars and sushi.

The cover photo, taken a few years ago in San Jose’s Japantown, invites reflection on the nature of icons. In some ways icons are the most essentializing of images, and yet we often cling to them in defining and negotiating identity. While the nature of icons may seem to be in the singularity of their meaning, they are often more complicated when examined closely. In looking at the cover photo, it is hard to resist the attraction of the car’s shiny chrome and almost

sensual bright red curves as it calls to mind so many narratives about America. For example, it evokes the attraction of speed, technological progress, and modernity, while at the same time, embodying nostalgia for the past. Cars like this one might call to mind concepts of American exceptionalism or, in contrast, they may remind one how few products are currently manufactured in the United States.

Nihonmachi itself might at first be perceived as itself a kind of icon, a symbol of cultural uniformity. And yet, when we look at the history of this Japantown, it too is a palimpsest with many layers and evoking many meanings. This same location has been a Chinatown and a Little Manila. The restaurant seen in the background of the photograph, Tsugaru, is run by a Korean American family. San Jose's Japantown is celebrating its 125th year in 2015 with two concerts celebrating two of its most important benefactors: John Heinlen, who owned the land between 6th and 7th streets that became San Jose's Chinatown, known as "Heinlenville," and J.B. Peckham, a lawyer who used his name to ensure that immigrant Chinese, Filipino, and Japanese families could acquire and retain land in order to pass it on to their native-born children, despite California's Alien land laws during the pre World War II era when Asians were not allowed to become naturalized, and even through the era of Japanese Internment.

Like most ethnic enclaves, San Jose's Japantown has its roots in housing discrimination and prejudice. The Chinese in San Jose, like those in the rest of California in the late 19th century, experienced extreme forms of racial prejudice. The Chinatown on Market street was most likely burned down by anti-Chinese arsonists. Heinlen, a German immigrant, himself endured threats and lawsuits in order to provide a place where Chinese families could find a home between the 1880's and the 1930's. When Japanese immigrants came in the 1880's, often taking jobs in agriculture which languished from a reduction in the Chinese population brought on by the 1882 Exclusion Act and enduring similar forms of discrimination, they tended to settle in the same areas that previous Asian immigrants had found homes. This pattern was repeated again when Filipinos immigrated in large numbers during the early part of the 20th century. Today, Japantown evokes all of those narratives. It is a place with roots in both acts of kindness and integrity as well as racial discrimination and hatred. It calls to mind both a more restricted past and a sense of belonging and pride. Hopefully this volume of *Asian American Literature: Discourses & Pedagogies* will serve to further remind us of the complexity of both identity and place.

Volume Six of *AALDP* begins with an interview with Lysley Tenorio, author of the short story collection, *Monstress*. Two of Tenorio's stories have been adapted for the stage and will be premiering this Fall. His collection is no doubt becoming a fixture on many syllabi focused on Asian American literature, short stories, or Filipino American literature courses. The interview is entitled "A 'Monstress' Undertaking" not only to remind readers of his short story collection, but as a pun on the truly gargantuan undertaking he has successfully

taken on in his writing: “a duty to render with accuracy, respect, and empathy, any person, place, or event that I might write about” (1). In the interview we also discuss the role of academia in literary consumption and recent national events that have served to remind those working for social justice that, while real change can happen, “bigotry, ignorance, fear, and stupidity are,” in Tenorio’s words, “unfortunately, part of being human” (9). One could say we are in a time of monstrous injustice, but also one of monstrous potential.

The articles for this volume have been arranged roughly chronologically by the time in which the texts they discuss were written and set. Caroline Porter examines one of the earliest Asian American authors’ depictions of both multi-racial identity and geographical identity in the early twentieth-century: “The Illegible Pan: Racial Formation, Hybridity, and Chinatown in Sui Sin Far’s “Its Wavering Image.” Susan Kevra’s “From Raw to Cooked: Amy Tan’s ‘Fish Cheeks’ through a Lévi-Straussian Lens” analyzes Tan’s 1987 autobiographical essay describing her own relationship to food and ethnic identity as she was coming of age. Christian Aguiar explores another generation of Chinese Americans coming of age: “‘Chinese don’t drink coffee!’: Coffee and Class Liminality in Elaine Mar’s *Paper Daughter*.” Aguiar examines Mar’s experience of the liminal spaces created by class and racial difference as well as the relationship between food and identity as expressed in her 1999 memoir. Jenny Heijun Wills’ “Fictional and Fragmented Truths in Korean Adoptee Life Writing” analyzes Kim Sunée’s 2008 *Trail of Crumbs: Hunger, Love, and the Search for Home* and Jane Jeong Trenka’s 2009 memoir, *Fugitive Visions: An Adoptee’s Return to Korea*, exploring the complicated nature of truth and the role of the author in tackling lost and irretrievable stories. It was Trenka’s use of the visual depiction of puzzles that inspired the idea for the cover.

Dr. Quan Manh Ha’s review of Bich Minh Nguyen’s *Pioneer Girl* closes this volume. It is our first time publishing a review of a literary rather than a critical work, yet we hope it marks the beginning of many more. For example, we hope to have reviews of Kirstin Chen’s *Soy Sauce for Beginners* and Andrew Lam’s *Birds of Paradise Lost* and their potential in the classroom in our next volume of *AALDP*. In closing, I would like to personally thank the efforts of the authors appearing in this journal. I would also like to thank the editorial board, including our two new members. Pam Thoma and Rowena Tomaneng, and my husband, Mark Brada, for the cover photograph. Most of all, I would like to thank the many reviewers who worked anonymously, yet tirelessly, simply for the good of scholarship. We quite literally could not do this without you. I would also like to thank the students in my Spring 2015 Asian American Literature class who suggested questions for me to ask Lysley Tenorio and helped to remind me of the central purpose of our scholarship.

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