

# *On Popular Visual Culture and Asian American Literature: Interview with Professor Elaine Kim*

*By Karen Chow*

On July 7 and July 8 of 2014, Karen Chow interviewed UC Berkeley professor and pioneering Asian American literature and visual culture scholar/filmmaker Dr. Elaine Kim via Facebook. In addition to authoring the first published scholarly book on Asian American literature, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction To The Writings and Their Social Context*, Dr. Kim co-founded the nonprofit multimedia organization Asian Women United (AWU; <http://www.asianwomenunited.org>) in 1976. Asian Women United produced several groundbreaking anthologies (*Making Waves*, *Making More Waves*, *InvAsian: Asian Sisters Represent*, *With Silk Wings*, *Dear Diane*) of Asian American Pacific Islander (API) women's writings, in addition to documentary films about Asian American Pacific Islander women, including *Slaying The Dragon* (1988) and its sequel *Slaying The Dragon Reloaded* (2011), about the representations of Asian women in American films, television, and new media YouTube).



**AALDP:**

**[Karen Chow](#)**

Hi Elaine, let's start with Asian Women United's (AWU) history, in particular what were the issues/concerns that led AWU to go in the direction of looking at film/media after putting together an anthology of women's writing (*Making Waves*)?



**[Elaine Kim](#)**

There was a lot of attention being paid to so-called mainstream feminist (white) concerns, and a small group of women working in mostly white male workplaces got together as a very informal support group, just to share our experiences. Actually, we really didn't know each other that well and had never been friends. We just had in common that we often felt isolated in our

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workplaces and thought that no one knew or cared about Asian American issues. I “suffered” much less because I was in Asian American studies, but we were so marginal within UC Berkeley.

The women felt sorry that high school and college aged girls would enter the workplace and be marginalized like we were. That's why the group's leader, Pauline Fong, then working for Asian Inc. (remember them?) suggested applying for a grant from the U.S. Department of Education to do a survey about Asian American women and girls' educational needs. I think I was the one interested in books and video materials, since I was already a teacher.

That was in 1976. By the time we got a grant in 1978 from the Women's Educational Equity Act Program (WEEAP, gutted after Reagan was elected a few years later), AWU did the survey. I became the project director of the *With Silk Wings* book project. I oversaw and wrote books while filmmaker Loni Ding made three videos, all aimed at girls and teens.

We got two more grants from WEEAP before the program was gutted. The Educational Director of WEEAP, a progressive white Jewish woman named Leslie R. Wolfe who was of the old progressive Jewish tradition of supporting sit-ins and school integration, was married to an African American guy, and she had a lot of ideas about getting to the Native reservations and Chinatowns, not just the middle class brokers and professionals. We were right up her alley because we jacked WEEAP up, thinking it was like a lot of other out-of-touch federal programs far away from communities of color, especially on the West Coast. She was responsive and receptive because we had some community support. She was the one who suggested an anthology, which became *Making Waves*. She said it was needed, and it turned out to be much used in Women's Studies' classes around the country. We Asian American women would never have thought of that but she bridged us to the mainstream white women. It turns out we were liked for 'educating them.'

The film *Slaying The Dragon* was, I think, my idea. We pitched it to WEEAP and they provided the seed money of about \$85K. Deborah Gee, the director we chose, had connections at KQED and managed to bring the budget to \$300K. The film ended up more in Asian American communities than *Making Waves* because CAAM ([Center for Asian American Media](#), which then became NAATA) distributed it. I was told that *Slaying The Dragon* kept NAATA's distribution program afloat for many years and was for a long time the biggest revenue producer among all their films.



AALDP:  
[Karen Chow](#)

It's interesting that the group evolved out of a need to share frustrations and has directed its energy to output/productions that certainly steered the conversation about representations of Asian women in literature, film, and TV starting in the 1980s. It makes me think of the comparison to #notyourasiansidekick and all the attention its creator Suey Park has generated for starting this twitter "movement," but people are now asking when is it going to be a "real" movement...and understandably first generation API feminists of your generation, notably Mari Matsuda, have expressed frustration that younger API women need a "hashtag" to learn about API feminism (["#NotYourAsianSidekick Is Great. Now Can We Get Some Real Social Change?"](http://ideas.time.com/2013/12/18/notyourasiansidekick-is-great-now-can-we-get-some-real-social-change/) <http://ideas.time.com/2013/12/18/notyourasiansidekick-is-great-now-can-we-get-some-real-social-change/>).



**Elaine Kim**

In my view, in the 1980s (more than in the difficult and confusing and often demoralized post-1960s decade of the 1970s), there was institutional and mainstream recognition of the existence of some marginalized groups and a small window of opportunity (\$). The idea was to convey US to THEM, to mainstream marginalized groups. You can read about the Ford Foundation policies directed towards weeding out troublemaking among African American Studies folks and trying to integrate and 'bring up' African American Studies to the mainstream with their funding guidelines, which were to make 'us' more like 'them' and to bring 'our stuff' to 'them.'

It was during this period when there was funding for our projects. Some APIs were able to take the money and make what we wanted and needed instead of just what the funders had in mind. They could not stop this. A good example is AIWA [[Asian Immigrant Women Advocates](#)]. When we designed that program, we followed all their funding guidelines, but the actual program has come out to be quite different. They were never thinking of immigrant women workers' leadership building.

For example, WEEAP evaluators complained that Loni showed Asian American high school cheerleaders in the opening sequence of her *With Silk Wings* videos. But we argued that though cheerleading might be 'unfeminist' for white girls, Asian American girls at that time didn't have chances to jump up and down yelling and stuff like that. Participation in "mainstream" American culture is different for different racial groups.

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What I am getting at is that though we were creative about what to DO with the mainstream support, we were opaque to the mainstream then and we did get support.

Now the times are different. [There has been major] demographic diversification of the API communities after exclusion laws changed. Many more APIs and even API issues sometimes actually in or near the mainstream have resulted in different challenges.



**AALDP:**  
[Karen Chow](#)

I'm really appreciating that as you describe the 1980s cultural/educational institutional landscape, there's a clear "mainstream/them/white" versus "marginal/us/nonwhite" and the mainstream at that point opened up enough (after the previous decades of civil rights activism/awareness raising) to have the funds available to do the great work that you and AWU did. In my involvement in AWU, it seems that we are seeing/treating online and social media as important sites of struggle for API women's representation. But it's also work that seems more diffuse and difficult to focus, manage, and grow.



**AALDP:**  
[Elaine Kim](#)

Society in general is not energized by the kinds of advocacy that worked in the past. Digital communication makes organizing both easier and more difficult. For sure, it's less lasting. So I feel young women today have enormous challenges compared to us older women and we aren't good at helping them because we had different circumstances and were used to different tools.

I don't understand how social media works. As you have probably noticed, I hardly use FB, never use Twitter or anything else. I just don't know how to make use of social media's effectiveness. It's sad to me that there are so few people ever looking at/knowing about AWU through the Internet, and I don't know how to do anything about it. But then I notice that someone can get 3 million hits (Psy) and be the talk of the world one week and forgotten within a few months! So I am totally unable to navigate our present times.



**AALDP:**

[Karen Chow](#)

Yes, I agree that the rapidity with which attention shifts and new content gets created online, along with traditional funding mechanisms having less to give out, makes it challenging to have a sense of history/continuity for struggles such as combating racism/sexism. But you certainly are able “to navigate” and even astutely read the current culture, and certainly you still are able to marshal and nurture young women’s interest in Asian American women’s issues, as evidenced by the fact that AWU is still active and producing work about these issues, when many of its API arts/cultural contemporaries have gone defunct. Do you feel that educational institutions are increasingly important spaces where we, as faculty/teachers, can hit a “pause” button on some of this content and open a space for students/people to engage more deeply in drawing cultural meaning?



[Elaine Kim](#)

I mean, it's interesting that after we (AWU) posted stories on our [Mother of All Stories](#) Tumblr blog, interest in AWU bloomed. But as soon as we flagged a little, the interest evaporated as the consumers moved on to graze in other pastures. It's exhausting to think about trying to keep pumping efforts into any of our digital projects. That's why I can't help going back to videos and books, but none of them get much attention either, compared to as in the past. That's in part because Asian women are no longer a novelty to the mainstream and in part because of the way digital media work, I guess.

Absolutely, teachers/educators who press the pause button can help people make sense of/think about issues, and students actually love and appreciate this.

*[Interviewer's Note: We ended the Facebook chat here as we both had appointments to go to and resumed the chat the next day. Karen emailed Elaine the following questions to focus on for the continued chat.]*



AALDP:  
[Karen Chow](#)

Hi Elaine,

Thanks again for being so accommodating in doing this interview! I think what we've covered already some of the history of the work you've done with AWU, leading into the challenges of rapidly evolving content and how to grab and hold attention on a topic/subject is a great start so far.

It would be great to also converse about:

1) What kind of content we are teaching now (media as well as books) and how students have responded? I remember you told me that you don't really do Asian Am literary criticism anymore, but do you still teach Asian Am lit and if so which texts?

2) A comment you wrote is "Asian women are...no longer a novelty to the mainstream." Do you think this translates to acceptance that API women as well as other women of color can play "any" role, yet actually seeing more API and other women of color taking on more diverse roles is still rare? It seems that there's still a tokenization of women of color--the characters may be more varied, but the roles are still scarce. Are there any recent or impending films/TV shows that you find really interesting/worthy of more dialogue? I just watched season two of *Orange Is The New Black* and there's one new character this season who is biracial Asian/white who is a political prisoner and she comes in as a young, idealistic, naive fully Americanized "granola girl" who hopes to empower the other women prisoners into protesting prison treatment through passive resistance tactics, group singing, meditation, etc. Then there's a new TV show about a Chinese (Taiwanese) family called *Fresh Off The Boat* debuting on ABC this fall, the first nationally syndicated show about an Asian Am family since Margaret Cho's *All American Girl*.

3) While surely always dynamic, do you think the relationship (between literature and visual culture/media) is changing in meaningful or significant ways in our current moment and if so, in what ways do you see this as particularly relevant for Asian American literature?

4) How hopeful are you that change lies in the increasing availability of, and apparent necessity for, visibility through new media technology? (As I think about this one, I think about how there are a growing number of API YouTube stars who draw millions of viewers and followers, yet none of them seem to have crossed over into media such as cable TV, Hollywood films, etc. And the number of API male YouTube stars still greatly outnumber women.

<http://www.jackfroot.com/2011/11/top-10-subscribed-asian-american-youtube-channels-5-1/>) Anna Akana is one newer YouTube star who did this video wrapping a message of self empowerment in the form of a parody of makeup tutorials, but she still looks conventionally "pretty" by the end:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f49xeXdfSgc> You could do a cynical reading of response to media where self empowerment messages are not heard unless the messengers are conventionally "hot.")



**Elaine Kim**

To your first question: I find that students always like to compare films. For instance they might like to compare *Wedding Banquet* with *Saving Face* or Mira Nair's early *Mississippi Masala* with her much later *Namesake* or *Chan Is Missing* with *Joy Luck Club*. Better yet, they like comparing Mike Siv's *Refugee* and Deann Borshay's *First Person Plural* or either of those with *Daughter From Danang*. Students from the past would have liked those exercises too.

I am not so good on new content, but they are interested also in (1) Internet stars like kev jumba and niga higa (2) kdrama and kpop and (3) video games.

In literary work, graphic novels especially good ones like Gene Yang's have gone over well. Youth literature like *The Choke Artis'* went over OK, not great. For my fall semester class, I am using several books: Julie Otsuka's *The Buddha In The Attic*, Leonard Chang's *Triplines*, Andrew Lam's *Birds of Paradise Lost*, plus some I have used before like Theresa Cha's *DICTEE* (excerpts), short stories by Carlos Bulosan and Hisaye Yamamoto, excerpts from Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, selections from Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*, and Brian Roley's *American Son*.

For literary criticism, students have responded well to essays on film (not essays on literature) and those mostly by Asian Americanists. For instance, Helen Jun on *AKA Don Bonus*, Jodi Kim on *First Person Plural* and *Daughter from Danang*. Definitely they do NOT respond well to any early essays like in Peter Feng's, Darrell Hamamoto's, or Russell Leong's anthologies.

On API women not being a novelty anymore, I mean just that it's not that our representation issues have disappeared; the mainstream public just 'moved on,' considering us 'history' and b-o-o-oring. They're always on the lookout for something new.

On the relationship between film and literature, I have no ideas about this. It is a question I have heard many times over the past half century, and I haven't heard any interesting answers. What about you? Reading *Eat A Bowl of Tea* and watching the Wayne Wang film = student yawns during discussions. I haven't found the key to making these discussions fruitful. I remember Michael Kang's chilly response to a question about *The Motel* and *Waylaid*. But then, I guess Ed Lin was very angry about that for some reason that both of them decline to talk about (legal silence?).

On new media and API YouTube stars not breaking out beyond YouTube popularity, I don't know the answer to that question either. I was always struck

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by (partly because of racism) there have been many mostly separate publics in the U.S. (in contrast to South Korea, for instance). Of course this might have resulted in lots of Asian American artists and performers being mostly appreciated by Asian Americans and their friends...? Maybe as walls among communities dissolve, the whole picture will change/is already changing? Maybe few API women participate in making/posting YouTube content because it's so terrible to have to deal with the horror of racist and misogynistic anonymous consumer comments? Suey Park hid out for a while, I guess.



**AALDP:**  
[Karen Chow](#)

My students also enjoy *All About Dad* and Gene Yang's graphic novels. I really like teaching Andrew Lam's *Birds of Paradise Lost* especially the story about the older man who works as a seamstress for a leather sex toys shop in the Castro. There's a lot for my students to unpack around gender, sexuality, generational differences, race in Lam's stories. I haven't taught *Mississippi Masala* and the other great films/docs you mentioned in awhile but those are good to bring back...do you find that your students don't have the attention span to watch a feature length film all the way through without checking their phones?

I find that I have to break up a film in chunks to bring their attention back to it through a bit of discussion. Yes, I haven't really assigned lit crit essays to my De Anza students. I do use (& explain) some academic/theoretical terms such as "orientalist," "post-colonial" "dialogic" etc.

It's interesting that pairing films made about/based on API books/stories hasn't gone well. Maybe because films like *Eat A Bowl of Tea* and *Summer Winds* (based on Yamamoto's "Seventeen Syllables" and "Yoneko's Earthquake") seem really slow by current film narrative pacing standards.

I'm hoping that ABC will show *Fresh Off The Boat* in the fall so we can discuss the episodes together as they play...I'm interested in hearing what students think about it. The trailer to me looks like a reprise of all-too-familiar kooky-immigrant-parents shtick but there is a kind of cultural "insider" POV making fun of white people that wasn't in *All American Girl*.

About new media, I also want to engage more student discussion about it because I had stopped following API stars on YouTube for a while, but now that there's more of them (like Anna Akana) and after the Twitter success of Suey Park, I'm interested to see if students are interested and participating.



**[Elaine Kim](#)**

You are so right about the pacing and lack of special effects and the yawn response to 'identity' issues. Filipino students are interested in *The Debut* but others are only interested to the extent that it features some blatantly recognizable types (white guy who knows more about the Philippines than Filipino Americans, gangster cousins, basketball practice, Filipino American teens being ashamed of Filipino food smells, etc. - these things seem to have extended over the decades) and maybe they could be made interested in the outtakes about how hard it was to make the film and how important community contributions were. But the lesson learned is that filmmaker Gene Cayajon was so exhausted by it all that he never made another film.

Sometimes I feel like the literary criticism is just not relevant anymore. I mean, some students' response to the carefully crafted close reading is 'who cares?' but that might be because of my attitude, which probably is apparent? So much of what gets circulated is really out there because people need tenure or promotion, not because they care about justice issues. And not to blame them, but the publishers and grantors of promotion don't care either; whereas, at the present moment anyway, students can read the essays on films because they are used to yelp reviews. Gina Marchetti was good for her reading of *The Cheat* [*Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (UC Press 1994)].



**AALDP:**  
**[Karen Chow](#)**

I'm thinking about looking at Tumblr (including AWU's [Mother of All Stories](#) and [Put Your Best Face Forward](#) feeds) as "texts" to critically read/respond to. Typing in "Asian American women" in Tumblr for instance yields interesting blogs. Actually, AWU's Tumblr sites do NOT pop up with the "Asian American women" search and I don't know enough about Tumblr yet to make sure they do...I think it might be like **T**witter, where you have to link it to the #Asian American women hashtag...? Maybe Eunice and Hannah might know? On identity issues and other films, it's not API, but there seems to be a lot of attention/acclaim around the film *Dear White People* (set to be released in October). I am so in agreement with you about why lit. crit. doesn't seem relevant to "real life." I'll have to check out the essay on *The Cheat*. Part of the problem I think is yes, the length of most journal articles (why can't they be short like yelp reviews?) and the fact that most are inaccessible to the public (you have to have access to a university library or subscription to research databases to

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access them). Maybe we can start a Tumblr for "Flash Lit Crit" (like flash fiction which is super short stories).

Our journal *AALDP* is free to access, by the way, but it is hard to find on the Internet. Let me try to google "teaching Asian American literature" to see if I can find it quickly. [Interviewer's Note: a Google search on this day, July 8, 2014 led to *AALDP* popping up as search item #7, where its URL appeared on Professor Noelle Brada's (and also editor of *AALDP*) website on "Asian American Literature: Resources for Research" which is at:

<http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/awilliams/AsianAmResources.html> ]



### [Elaine Kim](#)

Is *Dear White People* that blog about things white people say? Again, if it's about white people (I still remember a white woman asking writer Bienvenido Santos during his reading what Filipinos think of white people - he said, 'we don't think of them'), it'll always fly.

In response to your question about whether or not students have patience to see whole films: the nerdy ones certainly do. They hate clips and excerpts, perhaps because they fear being fooled or misled by someone's choices and contextualizations. Most students can see pretty substantial chunks and be better with that than having to sit through a long-ass film that for them moves too slowly. I am trying to find the balance between too little and too much when it comes to clips.



AALDP:

### [Karen Chow](#)

And also to meet the demands of tenure/promotion, we at *AALDP* also publish longer essays, but yes, I feel that it is mainly to serve the academic system, which is in need of updating to validate the modalities of writing that people, not JUST academics, read (and academics mainly read them to stay on top of the current research and ultimately further their own careers). *Dear White People* is a film that debuted at Sundance last year that is basically (from what I surmise from trailers/reviews) about what black people observe about how hilarious white people are in what they say/do around and about black people. So, yes, we are still dealing with the issue that you have to have a white focus somewhere in order for cultural mainstream to pay attention to it.

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About the clip length issue, I'm almost considering bringing a box to hold all smartphones while showing clips. The students' impulse to look at the phones constantly borders on compulsive in my classrooms--even if asked to put them away, they surreptitiously check them.



[Elaine Kim](#)

They say if Martians were to come to earth, they'd think cell phones were part of our bodies.



AALDP:

[Karen Chow](#)

LOL.

I'm also thinking about ways to use the cellphones as part of critical engagement (may as well join them if you can't beat them). There is a site called Poll Everywhere where you can create a poll that people answer via their smartphones and the results post almost immediately. So you can ask them to answer a multiple choice question, or short answer question. But then it seems silly to do that in a classroom that isn't a large lecture hall.



[Elaine Kim](#)

In response to your last post, yes, it could seem silly, but on the other hand people have been reminding us that the lecture hall format was developed for 19th century classrooms, when the most economical thing was to gather 60 kids in one big room and heat just that room! We don't have that same world anymore but have been having trouble figuring out what would be better setups.