

Excerpt • Temple University Press

Introduction: Toward an Asian American Modernism

“Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is”:
Exclusion and Intimacy

Wallace Stevens begins his oft-anthologized poem “The Snow Man” with the injunction, “One must have a mind of winter / To regard the frost and the boughs / Of the pine-trees crusted with snow” in order to “behol[d] / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.”¹ First published in Harriet Monroe’s *Poetry* magazine in 1921 and then in Stevens’s first book of poetry, *Harmonium*, in 1923, “The Snow Man” clustered its appearance around the 1922 *annus mirabilis*² of high modernism in which James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* were published. Literary critics have interpreted Stevens’s poem in a variety of ways, but most have argued that the poem is about some form of the Self and Other. Proclaiming Stevens a domestic, American modernist whose idyllic upbringing in Reading, Pennsylvania, continually shaped his poetry, critic Daniel Schwarz argues that the poem connotes “the present and winter.”³ By contrast, critic William Bevis claims that “The Snow Man” is arguably one of Stevens’s most Buddhistic poems, in which “the roots of mental activity are cut out” and the Self essentially aspires to become “No-Self,” or the Other.⁴

It is perhaps the ambiguous coexistence of the Self and Other, domestic and foreign, in this poem that spurred Edward Said to seemingly exempt Stevens from his indictment of romantic and modernist writers for engaging in “Orientalism.” In his magisterial 1979 book on the

Excerpt • Temple University Press

subject, Said defines this central term as the complex, hegemonic relationship in which the Occident exerts its power and domination over the Orient.⁵ He asserts, “My point is that Disraeli’s statement about the East [as a career] refers mainly to that created consistency, that regular constellation of ideas as the pre-eminent thing about the Orient, and not to its mere being as Wallace Stevens’s phrase has it.”⁶ Despite Stevens’s more neutral view of the East, he was nevertheless guilty of othering and fetishizing the East, for his letters reveal that he often imagined himself “sitting in Peking”⁷ when he drank tea sent to him by a Chinese man named Benjamin Kwok. His biographer Joan Richardson writes that “Stevens renewed his contacts with others in the East and asked for more objects that would sharpen his sense of what it felt like to be an Oriental.”⁸ In his poetry and life, Stevens discovered the Self by imagining himself as Other. This exemplified closeness of the Self and Other, or the domestic and foreign, fits recent definitions of American Orientalism and American Empire by critics Colleen Lye and Amy Kaplan. Distinguishing between European and American Orientalisms, Lye argues that the U.S. Open Door policies in Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century imagined the East as a stand-in for the Western Self rather than the foreign Other.⁹ Moreover, as Lye indicates, U.S. diplomatic forays into the Asia Pacific triggered the domestic legal exclusions, beginning in 1882, of Asian laborers who began to enter the United States as a result of capital expansion.¹⁰ Kaplan writes that following the Spanish-American War of 1898, new U.S. territories such as the Philippines and Puerto Rico were legally proclaimed as “both ‘belonging to’ but ‘not part’ of the United States.”¹¹ The social imaginary of the East as West that motivated U.S. foreign policy in the East during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century produced the equivocal and problematic middling between Self and Other that was thematic in so much Euro-American and Asian American modernist writing during this period.

I begin my book on the Asian American avant-garde with Wallace Stevens because, like the Asian American modernists in this study, he viewed himself as different from the other modernists of his day. In contrast to his fellow modernists, Stevens never traveled to Europe and actually embraced his American identity. Unlike Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, whose Fascist and conservative politics were bound up with their writings, he agnostically accepted that modernism possessed diverse political implications.¹² But, in truth, all modernists viewed themselves as outliers in some way. Following Pound’s credo, “Make it new,”

Excerpt • Temple University Press

modernists such as Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, William Carlos Williams, H.D., and Marianne Moore experimented with reinventing literary form and assumed their parts in the “lost generation” of the interwar period. Often narrowly defined as a period of literary, artistic, and intellectual exchange between the United States and Europe, modernism coincided with a period of U.S. expansion overseas, particularly in the Pacific. As Josephine Park argues in *Apparitions of Asia* (2008), the social imaginary of the Western Self as Eastern Other is thematized in Pound’s Chinese ideogrammatic poetry in which he elides the cultural difference between China and America.¹³ Modernist works often articulated estrangement from the Self through alienating aesthetics for a variety of reasons: trauma from World War I, anxieties concerning an impending second world war, migration, industrialization, the confounding national acquisition of foreign territories,¹⁴ or social marginalization of some kind.¹⁵ In fact, critic M. Lynn Weiss claims that the friendship and professional relationship between Jewish lesbian expatriate writer Gertrude Stein and African American writer Richard Wright were based, in part, on their mutual minoritization “within already marginal communities.”¹⁶

The ways in which Euro-American modernists such as Stevens, Pound, Eliot, Yeats, Williams, and Moore—to name a few—looked to the East for self-discovery during the modernist period of alienation and estrangement often seemed innocuous enough. They were nevertheless complicit in Orientalism—both classically European and American—insofar as the East was represented as something static and utilitarian in their literary endeavors. My purpose here is not to point fingers at the racializing and Orientalist practices of famous Euro-American modernist writers; nor do I wish to exonerate their Asian American contemporaries, such as Sui Sin Far, Sadakichi Hartmann, Yone Noguchi, Younghill Kang, Dhan Gopal Mukerji, and Carlos Bulosan, from similarly Orientalizing or reifying the East in their attempts to fit in to modernist circles. Instead, I wish to point to the difference between the ways in which Euro-American and Asian American modernists wrote about themselves in relation to the United States and Asia. Euro-American writers possessed the privileged mobility of moving between the domestic, Western Self and the foreign, Eastern Other, whereas Asian American writers were reductively perceived by Western audiences to statically represent the Other without the option of a domestic, Western Self.

Few studies have examined early Asian American writers *as* modernist writers. The political conservatism of modernist writers such as

Excerpt • Temple University Press

T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound has not historically made modernism a very attractive intellectual framework for the progressive sociopolitical aims of Asian American studies. Recent studies such as Park's *Apparitions of Asia*, Steven Yao's *Foreign Accents* (2010), and Jonathan Stalling's *Poetics of Emptiness* (2010), which examine the ways in which later, post-Civil Rights era Asian American writers take up the modernist forms established by figures such as Pound and Eliot, are inevitably forced to confront the uneasy political legacy that they left behind. After all, as critic Cary Nelson pointed out years ago in *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910–1945* (1989), form cannot be divorced from the author's politics as critics do the work of historicizing and recuperating modernism.

The Asian American Avant-Garde examines Asian American writers and artists who were contemporaries of Euro-American modernists and explores the ways in which they wrote back or responded to their racialization and the Orientalism that took place in modernist writing during modernism's historical overlap with the period of Asian exclusion, 1882–1945. Despite the problematic preponderance of Orientalism in modernist works, the same interest in the Orient and the Other enabled Asian American writers and artists to rise in their careers. The prominent literary magazine the *Little Review* proclaimed itself "THE MAGAZINE THAT IS READ BY THOSE WHO WRITE THE OTHERS."¹⁷ Critic Tim Armstrong writes that the "other" was at the crux of modernism's self-definition precisely because the modernist period fell "uneasily between the climax of imperial competition in the late nineteenth-century and post-1945 decolonization."¹⁸ However, instead of writing the others or about them, the Asian American writers discussed in this study often understood themselves as the other. Like their contemporary Euro-American writers, Sui Sin Far, Sadakichi Hartmann, Yone Noguchi, Dhan Gopal Mukerji, Younghill Kang, and Carlos Bulosan problematically reified the East and often rendered it static and timeless in their writings. But their own racializations as "other" animated (rather than authenticated) their personal memoirs and engagements with the East.

The Asian American Avant-Garde reframes early Asian American writers and artists as modernists, putting modernism and Asian American studies in direct relation to one another. It examines the modernist formal experimentations of early Asian American literature and art and relates them to those of other Euro-American modernist authors and artists. Critical work by scholars such as Houston Baker and Michael North,

Excerpt • Temple University Press

among others, has already been done to place early African American and Euro-American authors such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Jean Toomer, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, Stein, Williams, Pound, and Eliot and artists such as Picasso, Kandinsky, Brancusi, and Klee in relation to one another. This book contributes to the burgeoning scholarship on the many forms of Asian American modernism and their relations to those of other Euro-American modernist authors. Without anthologists such as Alain Locke, editor of *The New Negro* (1925), or Nancy Cunard, editor of *Negro: An Anthology* (1934), who helped establish early African American cultural national movements, better known as the Harlem Renaissance, Asian American writers and artists worked without a clear collective, ethnic American consciousness in the early twentieth century. Instead of an early cultural national consciousness, as my study shows, a common structure of feeling¹⁹ emerged among Asian American writers and artists who shared the same resentment toward Asian exclusion and similar visions of transforming American universalism. As critic Dorothy Wang has put it, the emphasis on Asian American formal experimentation expands the field of the avant-garde beyond the domain of racially unmarked or white culture; it also undermines historical assumptions about the authentic ethnographic functions of Asian American literature by demonstrating the capacity of Asian American works to articulate intellectual, sociopolitical creations.²⁰ If, as critic Joseph Jeon has argued, the opaque “thingness” of avant-garde objects represents the reified racialization of Asian Americans,²¹ then the Asian American avant-garde attempts to “de-thing-ify” the foreign objects that problematically represent the Asian American and her work. These Asian American writers and artists wrote against popular racist images of Asians in the early twentieth century such as Earl Derr Biggers’s fictional, obsequious character Charlie Chan, Sax Rohmer’s fictional, sexually deviant character Fu Manchu, and D. W. Griffith’s cinematic, yellow peril character Cheng Huan in *Broken Blossoms* (1919). During a period in which Asians were stereotypically perceived and objectified as “the pollutant, the coolie, the deviant, the yellow peril, the model minority, and the gook” in popular culture,²² the formalism of early Asian American modernists demonstrates that they were, in fact, thinking, intellectual artists like their white and black compatriots.

This book proposes that writers of Asian descent found ambivalent belonging in elite regional, national, and cosmopolitan literary circles, despite their legal exclusions from the nation. Even as these writers often found themselves further racialized and excluded within these

Excerpt • Temple University Press

literary groups, they nevertheless established close working relationships with white American authors. As historian Amy Sueyoshi points out in her book, *Queer Compulsions*, Yone Noguchi became acquainted with homosocial and homosexual bohemian circles primarily through his cohabitation with the white California poet Joaquin Miller and his homosexual relationship with writer Charles Warren Stoddard. Despite these intimate relationships, Noguchi was “racialized by [these] whites fascinated by the East.”²³ The experiences of early Asian American modernists during the interwar period were paradoxically marked by intimacy and exclusion.

Since the 1990s, critics have been working to extend the historically unstable definition of modernism beyond its Euro-American focus, elitism, and political conservatism. Critics Sarah Wilson as well as Thomas Vargish and Delo E. Mook have argued for an inclusive definition of modernism, whereas Madelyn Detloff, in her recent book, *The Persistence of Modernism* (2009), holds that the elitism of modernism is undeniable.²⁴ As Tim Armstrong argues, such contradictions of social inclusion and elitism inhered in the very constitution of modernism.²⁵ Armstrong and critic Michael Tratner, among others, add the confluence of high and low (mass) cultures to this list of modernism’s characteristic contradictions.²⁶ To further the instability of modernism’s definition, the periodization of modernism has varied greatly among critics, beginning as early as the 1880s and as late as the first decade of the twentieth century. However, most seem to agree that the terminal year was 1945. Regardless of the contradictions that constituted the movement and the inconsistency of its periodization, modernism irrefutably worked to incite social, political, and aesthetic change²⁷ and revolt against the ruling authorities of its cultural moment.²⁸ Under this banner of change and revolt, critics and literary historians such as George Hutchinson, Houston Baker, Michael North, and Michael Denning have decentered modernism away from the elitism of Euro-American conservatism by focusing on African American and working-class narratives of modernity.

This study follows Michael Denning’s seminal text, *The Cultural Front*, which characterizes the interwar years, particularly the 1930s, as the halcyon age of multiculturalism and leftist solidarity within American culture. Citing Bulosan’s *America Is in the Heart*—one of the texts discussed here—as an example of “cultural front” proletarian literature, Denning states, “Proletarian literature enfranchised a generation of writers of ethnic, working-class origins; it allowed them to represent—to speak for and depict—their families, their neighborhoods, their aspirations, and

Excerpt • Temple University Press

their nightmares.”²⁹ My study of early Asian American writers during this period aims, in part, to further Denning’s work. I present them as literary figures who were made visible during the interwar years precisely because of the progressive overlaps, which Denning discusses, between regionalism, political leftism, experimental modernism, and American mass culture. And yet, by the same token, they were continually minoritized by major writers in each of their literary circles to such an extent that they have—until recently—been excluded from the canons of literary regionalism, proletarian literature, and modernism.

Little Magazines and the Birth of Early Asian American Literature

As historian Alexander Saxton has indicated, Asian exclusion, specifically Chinese exclusion, was demanded by populists and the white working class, who viewed Asian laborers as a threat to American working-class values and U.S. culture as a whole.³⁰ Labor leaders such as the American Federation of Labor (AFL) president Samuel Gompers publicly advocated for the extension of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1902.³¹ Asian American writers and artists thus found refuge among the Euro-American literary and artistic elite during the period of Asian exclusion. The authors who are the subjects of this study—Sui Sin Far, Sadakichi Hartmann, Yone Noguchi, Dhan Gopal Mukerji, Younghill Kang, and Carlos Bulosan—were all “discovered” by little magazines, the oft-proclaimed engines of modernism, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Several of these authors were published in Harriet Monroe’s *Poetry* magazine. In addition to *Poetry*, Bulosan contributed to the radical proletarian magazines the *New Tide* and *the New Masses*, as well as the popular *Town & Country* and *Harper’s Bazaar*. Similarly, Sui Sin Far was published in modernist little magazines such as the *Fly Leaf* and *Lotus*, popular magazines such as *Good Housekeeping* and *Century*—to which Mukerji also contributed—and regionalist magazines such as the *Land of Sunshine* and *New England*.

The confluence of early Asian American writers in such diverse types of magazines supports the analysis by Frederick Hoffman, Charles Allen, and Carolyn F. Ulrich that little magazines at the turn of the twentieth century on were not limited to experimental, modernist endeavors but were in fact divisible into six categories: “poetry, leftist, regional, experimental, critical, and eclectic.”³² Moreover, Robert Scholes points to the inherent “paradox of modernism”³³ in terms of the gravitation

Excerpt • Temple University Press

to both high and low art throughout the literary and intellectual movement. Critic Mark Morrisson traces the continuity of advertising that appeared in and, in certain ways, united the modernist little magazines, regionalist magazines, radical proletarian magazines, and mass magazines.³⁴ The paradoxicality of the modernist magazines exemplifies the inherent dialecticism of the modernist movement and its accompanying scholarship.³⁵ As critic Lisi Schoenbach argues, the very definition of the avant-garde as shocking and institutionally resistant art destined to be absorbed by the institution points to the dialectical Manicheanism at its core.³⁶ As an intellectual and aesthetic movement, modernism emerged from the contradiction of high and low cultures.³⁷

The cross-pollinating publications of regionalist, mass national, and international socialist and modernist magazines that established the careers of early Asian American writers reflect the complicated Asian American identity that was at once both local and global. This identity found its literary proxy in the Asian Americans who were published in these magazines as both regional and foreign writers, often based out of similarly depicted ethnic (and alien) enclaves such as Chinatowns. Even from the privileged vantage point of the literary and artistic elite, the Asian American avant-garde could not escape their racialization. Subjectified by the joint U.S. foreign policy in the East and discourse of Asian exclusion, elite Asian American writers and artists once again “belonged to” but were “not a part of” the United States.³⁸

Avant-Garde Forms

The contradictory racialization of Asian Americans as foreign and racially particular yet residing in the United States expresses itself in the dialecticism of the avant-garde. That is to say, the formal responses of early Asian American writers and artists to their racialization in their avant-garde work dialectically transform American universalism—a universalism that empirically fails because of racism and other social inequalities in the United States. In addition to Wang’s and Jeon’s criticisms, works such as Timothy Yu’s *Race and the Avant-Garde*, Josephine Nock-Hee Park’s *Apparitions of Asia*, Davis and Lee’s *Literary Gestures*, Steven G. Yao’s *Foreign Accents*, and Zhou and Najmi’s *Form and Transformation*, among many others, have marked a recent turn toward formalist criticism in Asian American literature to which this study contributes. Many of these texts explore the ways in which Asian American writers have appropriated and rearticulated Euro-American

Excerpt • Temple University Press

literary forms as a strategy of political resistance and negotiating agency. In “Universalisms and Minority Culture,” David Palumbo-Liu discusses the limited subjectivity that emerges from the contradictions between the ethnic subject and the universal aesthetic form in which the subject is located.³⁹ He suggests that any engagement of an ethnic subject with an aesthetic form engages the author with the dialectic of the particular and the universal.⁴⁰ The modernist formal experimentations of early Asian American authors have been virtually ignored until now. Self-consciously engaging with white American and European aesthetic forms, such as regionalism, modernist haikus, and experimental narrative fragmentation, these individuals promote the progressive revision of American universalism and the contents of institutionalized art.

This dialectic resonates with Peter Bürger’s definition of the avant-garde as that which critiques the institutionalization of art and, in so doing, reparticularizes the aesthetic.⁴¹ In other words, a work is avant-garde by virtue of the interpretation of its relation to society and history rather than its isolated, formal content. And thus the Asian American works that I discuss, which critics have not previously seen as formally experimental, can be dialectically recast as avant-garde by recognizing their participation in contemporary aesthetic movements and resituating them within their cultural and historical milieus. In the foreword to *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Jochen Schulte-Sasse differentiates between modernism and the avant-garde based on the respective distinction between experimental formal content and radical social function.⁴² Schulte-Sasse explains that institutionalization involves ideological discourses that destroy and absorb that radicalism of avant-garde forms.⁴³ The sociopolitical work of the avant-garde, as defined by Bürger and Schulte-Sasse, creates an invaluable framework for Asian American critics such as Timothy Yu to argue for a radicalized racial avant-garde. However, critics such as Jeffrey Weiss pragmatically diversify the social and political functions of the avant-garde and modernism by arguing for their conceptual interchangeability against Bürger’s radicalization of the avant-garde and denunciation of modernism as politically retrograde.⁴⁴

The politics of early Asian American writers were diverse, ranging from conservative through progressive to radical Marxist. In spite of their different political proclivities, like Weiss, I would include them all as avant-garde modernists precisely because of their participation in formal experimentation and dialectical social engagements. The title of this study, *The Asian American Avant-Garde*, is intended to capture the historicity of modernism while also suggesting that Asian American

Excerpt • Temple University Press

authors were deploying high modernist forms to sociopolitical ends different from those of other modernists. They rearticulated modernist forms to critique Asian American racialization and exclusion. The placement of these Asian American avant-gardists alongside the canonized modernists who constitute a complex and unstable culture of socialists, reactionaries, progressives, and conservatives contributes to a more expansive understanding of modernism. While the distinction between modernism and avant-gardism is a highly contested one, it ultimately serves as a heuristic for reparticulating the social function of art as Bürger and Schulte-Sasse have argued.

The Asian American avant-garde revises Frank Chin et al.'s Civil Rights-era denigration of modernism as white supremacist and their exclusionary definition of Asian American literature as necessarily realist and culturally authentic.⁴⁵ Refuting Chin et al.'s view of avant-garde experimentation such as that of Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior* as "fake" and "racist,"⁴⁶ critics have argued time and again that the avant-garde is defined by change and action.⁴⁷ The avant-garde enacts change primarily through shock "as a stimulus to change one's conduct of life," Bürger argues.⁴⁸ The avant-gardism of early Asian American literature shocks on two levels: first, these writers appear to be simply reproducing dominant Euro-American aesthetic forms, and yet their content surprisingly critiques the Orientalisms of their Euro-American compatriots. Second, recognizing these often perceived realist or ethnographic writers as avant-garde delivers a critical shock effect. *The Asian American Avant-Garde* initiates a project that is, I hope, just beginning—one of recovering and reinterpreting Asian American modernists within the overlapping historical periods of modernism, Asian exclusion, and mounting U.S. imperialism. I have chosen to analyze Sui Sin Far's *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, the haiku poetry of Sadakichi Hartmann and Yone Noguchi, Dhan Gopal Mukerji's *Caste and Outcast*, Younghill Kang's *East Goes West*, and Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* to the unfortunate omission of many other early avant-garde Asian American texts such as H. T. Tsiang's leftist *The Hanging on Union Square* (1935), Miné Okubo's *Citizen 13660* (1946), Toshio Mori's *Yokohama, California* (1949), and John Okada's *No-No Boy* (1957). For this project, however, I found it necessary to recover texts that were explicitly in dialogue with canonical Euro-American writers and artists in order to demonstrate the ways in which avant-garde forms were redeployed to critique racial exclusion.

The aim of this study is not to perpetuate the false binary between purportedly racist Euro-American and progressive Asian American

Excerpt • Temple University Press

modernists. As scholars have shown, many Euro-American modernists were progressive and sympathetic to the struggles of ethnic minorities. While the sociological content of the Asian American texts in my study reflects critic Lisa Lowe's point that Asian American culture does not conceive of art as positioned in "an autonomous domain outside of mass society and popular practices,"⁴⁹ the avant-garde forms of the texts are not totally different from high modernist art. Rather than suggest that these literary works expressed "responsibilities to their [ethnic] community,"⁵⁰ I argue that their contributions to cosmopolitan communities of modernists were expressions of universalist aspirations.

This book primarily focuses on literary and verbal avant-garde forms of Asian American modernism. However, to illuminate the discussion I have included illustrations of visual art produced by Asian American artists who were contemporaries of the figures in my study in order to demonstrate the coincidence of political and formal preoccupations between visual and verbal Asian American art produced during this period. Among the various Euro-American avant-garde movements in the early twentieth century, cubism appears to have had the greatest influence on early Asian American literature and art. A recently released compendium of Asian American art from Stanford University Press, edited by Gordon H. Chang, Mark Dean Johnson, and Paul J. Karlstrom, features the cubist styles of Asian American modernists such as Isamu Noguchi, Dong Kingman, and Yun Gee (as well as the experimental performance art of Michio Ito).

While the influence of cubism on Euro-American modernist literature, such as Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives*, Ezra Pound's imagist poems, and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, has been extensively studied by literary critics,⁵¹ its impact on contemporaneous Asian American literature has yet to be thoroughly addressed. In the works of Yun Gee, for example, the multifaceted geometrical planes that are the hallmarks of cubism are employed in order to articulate the complexity and distress of the Asian immigrant experience. Historian Anthony Lee writes that Yun Gee developed his cubism into a form called "diamondism," which was "a more colorful variant of cubism, more concerned with hot and cold color contrasts, and more interested in a rhythmic organization of edges and facets."⁵² Moreover, Yun Gee's method "was built around a meditation on moods and morality, as if the very laying down of colors and edges was the equivalent of psychological processes and ethical behavior."⁵³ In his famous cubist painting, *Where is My Mother*, for example, Yun Gee articulates the complex heartbreak of quashed dreams and the diasporic

Excerpt • Temple University Press

dislocations of Chinese immigrants who are excluded in the United States through stark contrasts in color and cubistic shapes.

Furthermore, artists such as Dong Kingman who experimented with cubism, fauvism, and Asian calligraphy demonstrated their investment in cosmopolitan universalism in the hybridized forms of their art. Art historian Mark Dean Johnson argues, “Artists who received much of their education in Asia, like Dong Kingman[,] . . . enabled a stylistic subtle middle ground that reflected both accuracy in perspective and calligraphic paint handling.”⁵⁴ Beyond the utopian fusion of East and West that emerges from his hybrid style, Kingman’s popularity emerges from his detailed representation of urban life and cosmopolitan cities.⁵⁵ Through both form and content, Asian American artists emphatically insisted on their modernity despite Orientalist discourses that would subject them as ancient foreigners. The co-optation of European institutionalized forms such as cubism for Asian American projects, like the dialectical formation of the Asian American subject (between ethnic particularity and liberal universalism), imbues the forms with politically progressive, “avant-garde” particularity. And like their literary contemporaries, these works dialectically envisioned democratic utopias through their critiques of racism.

The Possibility of Universalism?

Despite the intellectual disenchantments with the concept of utopia that followed World War II and the Cold War, critics Rosalyn Gregory and Benjamin Kohlmann argue, utopianism was an integral part of modernist thinking.⁵⁶ Moreover, in his essay in their edited volume, Douglas Mao argues that T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens explore the unseen in order to displace the “not-yet” of utopia.⁵⁷ The utopianisms articulated by early Asian American authors seem at first to be assimilationist aspirations. However, for these authors and their protagonists, assimilation into American society was not merely an unattainable goal,⁵⁸ but a radical proposition during an era of legislated exclusion. In their works, these authors envisioned universal equality beyond the nation—utopias that would revolutionize an American democracy that was contradicted by legislated racism.

Lowe’s monumental reframing of Asian American subjectivity as heterogeneous, transnational, and antiuniversal initiated a spate of criticism that recast Asian American literature as transnational expressions of diaspora rather than cultural national claims of America—a framing

Excerpt • Temple University Press

that had initially defined the field during the Civil Rights era. The celebration of American universalism in many early Asian American texts, such as Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* (1946), however, disturbs anti-universalist assumptions. In fact, the dual critique of American democracy and advocacy of American universalism in *America Is in the Heart*, for example, served as fodder for the cultural national aim to carve out a separatist America that was alternative to the white, mainstream United States. And yet it is clear by the conclusion of his (now canonical) semi-autobiographical novel that Bulosan is neither celebrating a cultural national America nor a nationless space of exile but a universally inclusive utopia that is figured in the yet-to-be-realized American nation: "I knew that no man could destroy my faith in America that had sprung from all our hopes and aspirations, *ever*."⁵⁹ His envisioned America is not a separatist space of Asian American cultural nationalism but a utopia that includes his multiethnic and multinational friends and family. Far from dismissing the nation as a viable concept, Bulosan declares his unabashed devotion to a deferred America despite his protagonist's confrontations with racial discrimination in the United States.

The unrealized American universalisms, or counter-universalisms, promoted in early Asian American literature suggest that the paradigms of cultural nationalism and transnationalism—which respectively disavow and deconstruct the status quo of American universalism—offer inadequate lenses of interpretation for these texts. Early Asian American literature before the Civil Rights era is rife with seemingly nonironic expressions of counter-universalism. This study argues that texts before the Asian American cultural nationalist moment of the 1970s often pledged their allegiance to American democracy and diplomacy despite contemporaneous Asian exclusions and American imperial incursions overseas. Why, then, does Asian American studies seem to repudiate and deconstruct American universalism during and after the cultural nationalist period?

While it seems that no study could be expansive enough to thoroughly tackle this question, Neil Lazarus, Steven Evans, Anthony Arnove, and Anne Menke's article, "The Necessity of Universalism," offers some insight into why universalism is pervasively understood as an ideological offshoot of global capitalism after 1968.⁶⁰ Lazarus et al. argue that the consolidation of the bourgeois class domination is historically "facilitated by the crystallization of a universalistic ideology."⁶¹ The convergence of bourgeois domination and universalism since 1968 has thus provoked considerable backlash against universalism among

Excerpt • Temple University Press

anticapitalist and anti-imperialist theorists as well as cultural producers who have, in turn, favored deconstruction and a politics of difference as solutions to the inequalities of capitalism and imperialism. My study argues that before the solidified dominance of bourgeois ideology, early Asian American literary texts critiqued U.S. industrial capitalism in which Asian immigrant laborers were exploited and barred from citizenship by embracing universalist ideologies. They did so diversely, through formal engagements with literary regionalism, literary modernism, and Progressive or leftist avant-gardism. Their critiques of industrial capitalism attempt to herald genuine, universal democracy, calling on the United States to make good on its democratic promises.

Asian American Universalism

My project traces a genealogy of counter-universalism in early Asian American literature that led to the panethnic formation of the Asian American literary canon in the 1960s and 1970s. To clarify, my intent is not to locate the “origins”⁶² of Asian American universalism, or counter-universalism. Instead, I present genealogical snapshots or instantiations of the ways in which counter-universalism multiply figured itself in early Asian American literature.⁶³ This book contributes to the recent critical unmooring of panethnicity as the organizing principle of the field. It does so by arguing that the panethnic paradigm based on the anachronistically imposed alliance of excluded diverse Asian ethnic groups alone did not structure early Asian American literature. I maintain the paradigm of panethnicity to the extent that I demonstrate the ways in which early, multiethnic Asian texts respond to contemporaneous Asian exclusion. Rather than rest on a positive notion of panethnic solidarity, my conceptualization of early Asian American literature focuses on the ways in which the authors of these early texts represented themselves and their gendered, “Asian American” protagonists as universal (even though they were clearly not). In this way, counter-universalism was a recognizable practice of “making strange,” challenging, and *transforming* (rather than only undermining) dominant white American cultural and social conventions.

The employment of modernist literary forms and the performances of American social norms by Asian American subjects, who are always already feminized, in these texts assert particularized universalisms. These counter-universalist performances point to the ways in which the Asian American subjects have been racially particularized and expose

Excerpt • Temple University Press

the doubleness of American universalism—that is, the failed universalism that excludes racial minorities and the promised inclusive universalism that is yet to come. These early Asian American subjects' apparent faith in an unrealized American universalism differs from both the assimilationist stance of liberal universalism that denies difference and the antiuniversalist endorsement of difference that seems to mobilize the paradigms of Asian American cultural nationalism and Asian American transnationalism in distinct ways. The authors explore alternative universalisms or counter-universalisms that are based in part on their racial experiences under Asian exclusion in the United States. Through these counter-universal practices, they each imagine an alternate universe or a cosmos that is inclusive of difference. They begin to transform American universalism dialectically by acknowledging their racializations and then relating to other Euro-American modernists as well as racial, gendered, classed, and sexual minorities. Since American universalism has empirically failed to deliver social equality, these forged relationships within and outside their literary texts serve as proleptic glimpses of the social utopias that these early Asian American writers and artists envision. This social imagining often finds its geographic figuration in an anticipated America—in contrast to the protagonist's empirical United States. In so doing, it provides an avenue to a more effective realization of American universalism rather than to the blindness to racial and gender exclusions with which liberal pluralism functions.

By privileging the United States as the potential space of universalism, the authors discussed in this study indeed espouse an ideology of American exceptionalism to various extents. Yet, differing from the exceptionalist (pro-frontier) thesis of Fredrick Jackson Turner, theirs are continually deferred exceptionalisms that account for the empirical failures of American universalism. For example, I argue in chapter 4 that in *America Is in the Heart*, Bulosan's protagonist, Carlos, critiques the racism, chauvinism, and classism in American culture while imagining a socialist utopia that he also calls America. Insofar as Bulosan preserves racial, gender, and class difference in his vision of utopia, the content of his inclusive universalism differs from the erasure of difference that is adopted by liberal pluralism. The deferred promise of inclusive universalism informed the egalitarian visions and inclinations articulated in the early texts discussed here. My conceptualization of Asian American universalism fortifies the theoretical aspect of the sociological paradigm of panethnicity. While other critics have recently theorized Asian American panethnicity through deconstructive readings of political

Excerpt • Temple University Press

resistance and melancholic abjection, I refer to the alternative universalisms explored in these texts as structurally different and more historically specific political readings for the theorization of Asian American panethnicity before the Civil Rights era. A deconstructive approach would disregard the extent to which these authors laid claim to America. I argue that they did so in ways that were necessarily internationalist, rather than anachronistically cultural nationalist or nationalist, during the contemporaneous moment of Asian exclusion in the United States.

Since U.S. belonging or assimilation was conceived of as liberal universalism during the period of Asian exclusion, becoming “Asian American,” for these authors and their protagonists, did not merely deconstruct universalism. Instead, it advanced contradictory depictions of racial exclusion and an inclusive utopia in order to renew the possibility of and transform American universalism. The period of Asian exclusion coincided with waning racial biologism, emergent liberal pluralism, and U.S. imperial conquest that was formally initiated by the Spanish-American War. Whiteness and Americanness were never perfectly synonymous in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, as historians Nikhil Singh and Mae Ngai have argued. However, the two nevertheless acted in concert to signify universalism at home and abroad to the exclusion of racialized minorities such as Asian immigrants. The early texts that I examine demonstrate that attempts to represent Asians as universal figures were particularly problematic before the period of legal citizenship: as Ngai suggests, Asians emerged from legal exclusions as *impossible subjects*—barred from the universalism of the nation. Instead of detaching the nation from its sovereign universalism by “provincializing” it,⁶⁴ the Asian American authors and their protagonists respond to the particularity of their impossible subjecthood by envisioning alternative national or international spheres that include Asians among many other racial, gendered, and class minorities.

My theoretical conceptualization of “Asian American” as a subjectivity that emerges from the contradiction between racial exclusion, or particularity, and American universalism contrasts with other panethnic and more recent transnational paradigms of Asian American studies that diversely critique American universalism and favor racial particularity. In *Immigrant Acts*, Lowe famously posits that Asian American critique is located in this dialectic between American universalism and racial particularity. Her theorized engagement with the dialectic of American universalism, however, results in its deconstruction rather than its synthetic transformation.⁶⁵ Despite the transnational turn in the field that

Excerpt • Temple University Press

redefines Asian American literature as narratives of diaspora rather than cultural nationalism, critics such as Sau-ling Wong and Shirley Lim have warned against the dangers of completely dismissing the nation as a site of political resistance in the critical field.⁶⁶

In her introduction to *Form and Transformation in Asian American Literature*, Zhou Xiaojing cites the works of Jinqi Ling, David Leiwei Li, E. San Juan Jr., Viet Thanh Nguyen, and David Palumbo-Liu as significant contributions to a body of criticism that attempts to move beyond the dual paradigms of transnationalism and cultural nationalism. She writes that these critical works “point to the fact that Asian American agency resides in negotiation with, not separation from, dominant ideologies and literary traditions. . . . These studies suggest that in order to recognize the possibilities of Asian American authors’ agency in transforming hegemony, it is necessary to understand that dominant American literary discourses are neither homogeneous nor bounded by a discrete culture.”⁶⁷ Likewise, the discourse of American universalism was not identical to the culture of racial exclusion in which early Asian American authors wrote. My focus on their rearticulations of American universalism, or their counter-universalisms, suggests that the racial particularity in the literature that has been so accentuated by cultural nationalism and transnationalism nevertheless contains an inherent, universal vision of racial egalitarianism. For many poststructuralist critics, Asian American subjectivity is imagined through the impossibility of its universalism. On the other hand, I am arguing that the Asian American is formed through the dialectic between racial particularity and liberal universalism in the early texts. In them, Asian American particularity indicates the failure of American universalism, while Asian American universalism repositions liberal universalism to fulfill its formal promise of racial inclusion.

Dialectically emerging from liberal universalism, Asian American universalism suggests the inefficacy of an American universalism that does not include Asians. As I mentioned earlier, Asian men and women were historically stereotyped as effeminate and hyperfeminized.⁶⁸ Thus Asian American racial exclusion was always already an implicitly gendered exclusion as well. The female and male protagonists of the texts featured here often seem to relate to the struggles of activist white women and women of Asian descent. In contradistinction to the masculinist politics advocated by many of the cultural nationalists of the 1970s, many of the authors of my study appear to subscribe to complex, Progressive, or leftist gender politics. In texts such as Sui Sin Far’s *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* and

Excerpt • Temple University Press

Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart*, the visible political struggles of female activists appear to foreground the racial conflicts experienced by the Asian American protagonists. That is to say, the alliances of sympathy, however problematic, created between the female activists and the racialized and gendered protagonists grant visibility to the political struggle of Asian Americans. In the poetry of Sadakichi Hartmann and Yone Noguchi and the fiction of Dhan Gopal Mukerji and Younghill Kang, the poetic personae and protagonists often identify themselves closely with females or even *as* female. Such gendered identifications are self-reflexive strategies that call attention to the multiple ways in which their formal experimentation articulates specific political concerns about race and gender that were often alternative to contemporaneous Euro-American modernists.

Looking Back: Critical Background

A few anthologies, such as Keith Lawrence and Floyd Cheung's *Recovered Legacies* and Josephine Lee et al.'s *Re-Collecting Early Asian America* have compiled studies of pre-1965 Asian American literature. The present work is the first book-length study that conceptualizes the early canon. I focus on early Asian American literature before the very existence of the term "Asian American" in order to further the work that has been and continues to be done to reassess the parameters of the field of Asian American studies. The question of what centrally constitutes the field of literatures has preoccupied critics since the 1990s. In her essay "The Fiction of Asian American Literature," Susan Koshy points to this crisis when she writes:

But it is precisely this question, "How are we to conceptualize Asian American literature taking into account the radical disjunctions in the emergence of the field?" that it has now become historically and politically most urgent to ask, because of pressures both inside and outside the community. The radical demographic shifts produced within the Asian American community by the 1965 immigration laws have transformed the nature and locus of literary production, creating a highly stratified, uneven and heterogeneous formation, that cannot easily be contained within the models of essentialized or pluralized ethnic identity suggested by the rubric Asian American literature, or its updated post-modern avatar Asian American literatures.⁶⁹

Comparing Asian American studies to Chicana/o, Native American, and African American studies, Koshy adds, "The lack of significant

Excerpt • Temple University Press

theoretical work has affected its development and its capacity to address the stratifications and differences that constitute its distinctness within ethnic studies.⁷⁰ Koshy's seminal essay contributed to the transnational turn and the poststructuralist theorization of the field that have reassessed cultural nationalist paradigms.

Contrary to the cultural nationalists of the 1970s, who framed these early works as attempts to claim America, the writers of this early period of legislated Asian exclusion in the United States were more interested in engaging with international modernist forms as a way to frame themselves and their protagonists as universal. Rather than claim a culturally separatist America that revolts against an empirically racist one, the authors here claim universality by envisioning a reinvented America. Acknowledging the anachronism of the term Asian American during this period, I endeavor to reconstruct the term rather than to deconstruct it.

Despite the rigorous intellectual work by critics such as Lisa Lowe, Sau-ling Wong, Sucheta Mazumdar, and David Palumbo-Liu during the postnational critical turn in the 1990s to recuperate the field from its cultural nationalist origins, the field of Asian American literature has been criticized or simply abandoned as such by critics who favor less nation-centric and more transnational theoretical paradigms involving ethnic Asian diasporas, postcoloniality, migrancy, globalization, or exile. I conceptualize "Asian American" as a subjectivity that emerges from the contradictions between liberal universalism and a racially particular identity and demands the fulfillment of American universalism. This theorization contrasts with cultural national and more recent transnational paradigms of the field that perceive universalism as an (ideological) impossibility. I demonstrate that the racial particularity in Asian American literature that has been accentuated by cultural nationalism and transnationalism nevertheless contains an inherent, universal vision of racial egalitarianism that preserves cultural difference.

Because of their canonization in the cultural nationalist anthologies of the 1970s, some early Asian American writers have long been associated with certain masculinist anthologists of the period. By attempting to recuperate the image of Asian American men from the historical stereotype of Asian male effeminacy or sterility, cultural nationalists such as Frank Chin emphasized masculinity and also bludgeoned Asian American feminist projects. As a result, canonical authors such as Sui Sin Far and Carlos Bulosan have been respectively critiqued as anti-Progressive⁷¹ and misogynist.⁷² This book explores the complicated gender politics

Excerpt • Temple University Press

that are figured in the literary works beyond the binary of misogyny and feminism. I demonstrate that the gender politics of these writers were often progressive within their historical moments. For example, in chapter 1, I argue that white female suffragism is critiqued by Sui Sin Far for its narrow social perspective in its contemporary incarnation. Despite its ideological flaws, suffragism also becomes the vehicle through which she calls for a gendered and racial democracy. In the Popular Front chapters, middle-class and working-class women mobilize the authors' visions for socialist internationalism. In general, the empirical nonexistence of Asian American universalism poses a baseline problem of invisibility. Thus throughout the book the universalist demands of racial egalitarianism take the visible or more easily identifiable forms of progressive gender politics and modernist avant-gardism.