

# Producing Asian American Spaces: From Cultural Nation to the Space of Hybridity as Represented in Texts by Asian American Writers

Fukuko KOBAYASHI

## I INTRODUCTION: AMERICA AS AN •IMAGINED COMMUNITY Ž AND ITS CONSTRUCTION OF ASIANS AS •PERMANENT ALIENSŽ

In his introduction to *Nation and Narration*, Homi Bhabha asks rhetorically, •What kind of cultural space is the nation?Ž Drawing upon Benedict Anderson's concept of nation-states as •imagined communities,Ž Bhabha argues that nations can come into being only through the telling of stories, such as the myths of •originŽ or •foundation mythsŽ that bind the otherwise disparate mindsets of their people.

It is no surprise, then, that in a multi-racial nation like America the compulsion to establish unity and cohesion through such emotionally binding narratives is particularly strong. Indeed, it hardly needs saying that the idea of America as a uni"ed community has depended largely upon the repetition of such •foundation myths,Ž such as the Pilgrim Fathers landing on Plymouth Rock off the *Mayflower* or the frontiersmen exploring the •Virgin LandŽ as the •New Adam.Ž However, we are simultaneously aware of the fact that a slave ship carrying captured Africans had reached Jamestown one year prior to the *Mayflower's* landing and that in the so-called •Virgin LandŽ indigenous Americans had lived for generations.

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In view of these facts, we cannot but conclude that the construction of America as a nation-state was dependent on the idea of America as an untainted space, where only white Caucasians could enjoy full visibility. As Toni Morrison states in *Playing in the Dark*, being “American” meant being “white.”<sup>3</sup>

Thus in the imagined community of America as a space of purity, so-called people of color were destined to have only a shadowy existence. Of all non-white people in the U.S., the group that remained among the easiest targets for such exclusion were people of Asian descent, who by common consent are the latest comers to the U.S., the foremost being of Chinese origin, who began to arrive in the mid-19th century, and of Japanese origin, who began to arrive in the late 19th century. This fact is clearly demonstrated in the series of U. S. immigration laws, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Alien Land Law, and the Japanese Exclusion Act, as Lisa Lowe explains meticulously in her pathbreaking work on Asian American cultural politics titled *Immigrant Acts*.<sup>4</sup>

What should be noted is that, whenever we see such blatant moves to exclude people of Asian descent, some critical development is occurring either within or without the U. S. borders. Thus the 1880s, the time of the Chinese Exclusion Act stemming from the “yellow peril” phenomenon, coincides with the disappearance of the frontier and the subsequent large-scale American advancement into Asia, resulting in the first U.S. war in Asia, namely the U.S.-Philippines war in 1898. Granted that the so-called “yellow peril” syndrome, castigating people of Asian origin as invariably alien and barbarian, was due in a large measure to the threat posed by hard-working, low-waged Asian immigrants to white workers, the more significant cause was a compulsion to achieve a sense of unity on the part of mainstream America at its critical moment. Indeed, the construction of Asians as “exotic Others” was crucial in solidifying the national foundation.

With the more egalitarian Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, such blatantly discriminatory practices toward people of Asian descent seem no longer feasible. In fact, there has been a marked tendency among mainstream Americans to celebrate people of Asian origin as an exemplary ethnic group who have successfully promoted themselves to middle-class status thanks to their unusual perseverance and hard work. But this “model minority” discourse, which dumps all people of Asian origin into a readily assimilable ethnic group, can itself be a different version of the Orientalist discourse that has been prevalent throughout the century.

In the following pages, I will examine some noteworthy literary texts by writers of Asian descent, writers who invariably attempted to construct their own subjectivity through their writing. I will view each of the texts as the author's endeavor to produce what might be called Asian American spaces, distinct from mainstream America.

But, one might ask, what on earth can Asian American spaces mean? For some the term might evoke those tangible ethnic communities like Chinatowns and Japan Towns. Certainly those places can be part of what I regard as Asian American spaces. However, I am referring specifically to spaces of a more metaphorical kind—what Henri Lefevre designates as “mental” or “abstract spaces,”<sup>5</sup> those that ideally can have a concrete social function as, to use Lowe's words, “countersites to U. S. national memory and national culture.”<sup>6</sup> The task of producing such spaces is by no means easy, however; driven by the compulsion to achieve unity, it holds the danger of engendering yet another exclusionary space.

I will trace the following three kinds of Asian American spaces represented in Asian American literary texts: 1) a space of cultural nationalism as constructed in texts by early male writers, 2) a space of mothers and daughters as produced in texts by women writers with an emphasis on gender consciousness, 3) a space of hybridity as created in texts by recent women diasporic writers. Of these three, I will pay special attention to the last, which I designate as a “Thirdspace,” a space beyond the closed system of conventional binarisms.<sup>7</sup>

## II ASIAN AMERICAN SPACE AS A CULTURAL NATION IN TEXTS BY FRANK CHIN AND OTHERS

The term “Asian American” originated from the ethnic movement of the 1960s to create solidarity among the otherwise scattered constituents of the Asian American population, which then was largely composed of Chinese and Japanese Americans along with a much smaller number of Filipino Americans. In their effort to seek ethnic self-esteem, these early practitioners of the “Asian American movement” began to seek out and express their cultural heritage, including literature, which came to be called “Asian American literature,” still hardly known to mainstream readers.

Bruce Iwasaki, one of the early Asian American literary critics, expressed his sigh of regret over the deplorably marginalized state of their literature in the pioneering Asian American Studies textbook titled *Roots*:

The experience of Asians in America has been such a neglected area of study, there is no wonder that the literary output of Asian Americans is virtually unknown. True, there have been no Japanese American Saul Bellows; no Chinese-American Ralph Ellisons; no Filipino American Scott Momadays. But there have been—and are—noteworthy authors of Asian descent in the United States.<sup>8</sup>

The tone of Iwasaki's voice found an echo in the preface to the first anthology of Asian American literature titled *Aiiiiiiiii!* (1974), edited by four male writers of Chinese and Japanese origins, who all participated in the 1960s and 70s Asian American Movement—Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada and Shawn Wong. What is noteworthy about this preface is that the editors' anger was directed not only toward white racism but also toward Asian Americans themselves who had internalized the mainstream's image of them either as “unassimilable Aliens” or an over-assimilated “model minority.”

Impatient with this dual personality paradigm, they proposed a more whole, unified version of their own identity that they argued was genuinely Asian American: namely, the “Japanese-, Chinese-, Filipino-Americans who are ‘American born,’” who possess an “Asian American sensibility distinct from Asia and white America.”<sup>9</sup> One may sense in such a clearly demarcated Asian American identity these editors' acute desire to claim their own space as a unique independent ethnic group within the U.S., a space that is clearly an “Asian American space.” Stated with firmness and vehemency, this *Aiiiiiiiii!* version of Asian American identity turned out to have a considerable influence on the terrain of Asian American literature, with its ensuing tendency to privilege only those writers who were American born, English-speaking, and of East Asian descent.

This stance of the *Aiiiiiiiii!* group, which has since been termed one of Cultural Nationalism, proved to have limitations, however, with the dramatic increase of Asian-born immigrants not only from East Asia but from South and Southeast Asia during the 1980s. Another factor that came to appear increasingly limiting was their undisguised tone of male-centeredness as exemplified in the passage where the editors expressed their frustration toward mainstream labeling of any Asian American man as a desexualized type: “At worst, the Asian American is contemptible because he is womanly, effeminate devoid of all the traditionally masculine qualities of originality, daring, physical courage, and creativity.”<sup>10</sup>

The subsequent popularity of Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan

among mainstream readers, which I will discuss later, only exacerbated these editors' sexism, especially that of Frank Chin, the most militant of the four, and engendered what was later termed the "gender war in Asian American literature"—a war that rendered Chin as the perpetual enemy to any feminist critics involved. However, if we examine the very stance of so-called Cultural Nationalism itself, we can see that what is at issue is not the mere personal idiosyncrasy of Chin as a misogynist but the premises of Cultural Nationalism itself, which is invariably problematic in terms of gender.

As black feminist critic Madhve Dubey has pointed out, the concept of Cultural Nationalism was originally deployed in the Black Movement of the 60s on the assumption that "black people in this country make up a cultural nation" and that any program to liberate black people should first emphasize a "revolution of cultural consciousness."<sup>11</sup> Needless to say, the "cultural nation" referred to here is different from the official nation-state in that it has no autonomous government of its own but is endowed with the basic rights to self-determination. Dubey further comments on the discourse of the Black Aesthetic which she calls "the literary program" of Cultural Nationalism as follows:

Even as black cultural nationalism and its literary program, the Black Aesthetic, catalyzed the remarkable formal experimentation of black literature during the 1960s and 1970s, its race-centered aesthetic hindered a just appreciation of the works of black women novelists. . . . Black Aesthetic discourse, consolidated around the sign of race, discouraged any literary exploration of gender and other differences that might complicate a unitary concept of the black experience.<sup>12</sup>

Thus we come to a realization that the so-called "gender war in Asian American literature" was to a large extent a repetition of what had happened in the black literary world; and that, whether it be black or Asian American, cultural or political, any group's attempt to construct a "national" space, with the inevitable compulsion to achieve unity and coherence, will lead to an exclusionary attitude, suppressing any differences within not only in terms of race and ethnicity but of gender as well.

How, then, is the stance of Cultural Nationalism reflected in the actual works in *Aiiieeeee!*? As examples, we can take two of the texts in *Aiiieeeee!*—namely Act I of *The Chicken Coop Chinaman* (1981), a drama by Frank Chin, and *No-No Boy* (1957), a novel by the late Japanese American novelist John Okada, hailed by the *Aiiieeeee!* editors as exemplary texts of Asian American literature.<sup>13</sup>

To be sure, both of the main protagonists in these works, Tampax Lum in *The Chickencoop Chinaman* and Ichiro in *No-No Boy*, are constructed as wholly deviant from the “model minority” type: Tampax vehemently attacks white society for failing to acknowledge him as a unique adult male, and Ichiro refuses to be drafted to fight in the Second World War. Likewise, both make common gestures in rejecting their ancestral cultures in contradistinction to the people immediately surrounding them. Thus both seem to be endowed with what *Aiiieeeee!* editors call an “Asian-American sensibility” that is “distinct from Asia and white America.”

However, those gestures on the part of the two protagonists are somewhat unsatisfactory when we realize that neither of them is capable of coming to terms with his surroundings: anxiously seeking a legitimate place in U. S. society, they are unable to take any concrete measures to reach their goal, while rejection of their ancestral cultures keep them alienated from their own communities. Perpetually suspended between the two already-occupied spaces, so-called “white America” and their own ethnic communities, they can find no place of their own in either.

The only way out of their sense of futility is found in the comfort offered by women surrounding them: Tampax seeks moments of solace from women like “Hong Kong Dream Girl,” whom he considers a mere sexual object, while Ichiro derives comfort from casting blame for his situation on his mother’s failures. As has been pointed out by Elaine Kim, Chin’s propensity toward making a virtue of male virility is manifested in his desire to identify himself with the Western cowboy-type hero.<sup>14</sup> One might say his male-chauvinism is shared by all the editors of *Aiiieeeee!*.

Most probably what these *Aiiieeeee!* editors wished to convey was that if all Asian American men could grow as “masculine” as Tampax and Ichiro, they would eventually gain their own legitimate spaces within the U. S. Needless to say, however, this space will remain strictly a man’s world, where women are allowed mere secondary, subservient roles.

### III A SPACE OF MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS IN TEXTS BY MAXINE HONG KINGSTON AND AMY TAN

Ironically enough, it was works by two second-generation Chinese American women writers that realized what their fellow male writers could not, namely to construct positive Asian American subjectivities

and hence legitimate Asian American spaces as well through their own writing. The two works are *The Woman Warrior* (1975) by Maxine Hong Kingston and *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) by Amy Tan.<sup>15</sup>

As has been suggested earlier, most earlier texts by Asian American male writers—many of them of Chinese descent, such as Jeffery Chan, Shawn Wong, and Frank Chin—share a common pattern with their second-generation male protagonists searching for viable Asian American identities, invariably in vain. One reason for the failures of these protagonists can be discerned in the fact that their own immigrant fathers, usually presented as helpless ineffectual beings, are unable to offer any valid role models for their sons.

Exactly the opposite can be said about the two women writers' texts. They also deal with second-generation Chinese American protagonists seeking legitimate ethnic identities through exchanges with their parents, with the difference being that the central figures are daughters and mothers and that the mothers are extremely powerful and resilient. This doubtlessly reflects the actual situation in Asian American communities in terms of gender assignments: while men were apt to remain disillusioned by their inability to be accepted by white-centered society, women felt more stable in their home and communities, pursuing their more or less fixed role of preserving their indigenous culture.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, the mothers in *The Woman Warrior* and *The Joy Luck Club* are both so forceful that their daughters have to challenge them to attain any degree of selfhood. The mothers are intent on imparting to their daughters their own notion of proper womanhood based on the old Confucian ideas from China, emphasizing such "virtues" as woman's chastity and obedience. At the same time, those mothers continuously tell their daughters stories of their own experiences in China, demonstrating their uncommon strength and ingenuity as Chinese women, as well as the old Chinese folk tales concerning powerful legendary heroines such as "the woman warrior."

Through this interaction with their mothers, the daughters come to attain not only their independent American selves but also a more sharpened sense of their own cultural heritage passed down from their mothers, an important legacy with which the daughters can confront larger society. Thus Maxine, the daughter of *The Woman Warrior*, and the four daughter-protagonists of *The Joy Luck Club* together present refreshingly new Asian American subjectivities, at once rooted in America and yet not neglectful of their own cultural legacy.

It might well be argued that in their effort to construct legitimate ethnic identities acceptable to larger society, these women writers were appropriating their fellow male writers' concept of Cultural Nationalism for their own needs. The result, as we see, is a sort of a woman-centered ethnic "cultural nation," a space they could claim as their own through their writing.

It is, of course, to those women writers' credit that their works came to enjoy unprecedented popularity among mainstream readers. However, it should also be pointed out that they owe their success in no small measure to the particular intellectual climate of the U. S. society at the time when their works were produced. During the 1970s and 80s, there was a marked tendency among U. S. feminists to valorize so-called "her-story," or woman-centered historical narratives, based on the concept of the mother-daughter bond, in contradistinction to what is termed "his-story," based on the father-son bond, a phenomenon that helped considerably to generate the critical acclaim with which the works were received.<sup>17</sup> The emphasis on the idea of "multiculturalism" prevalent since the late 1980s is no doubt another factor in accelerating the wide acceptance of these texts, since their clear-cut demonstration of their own traditional cultural legacy was exactly what the general practitioners of multiculturalism valued.

Thanks to these two women writers, Asian American literature attracted a surge of attention from the mainstream media. At the same time, however, partly due to their being positioned as representative writers of a newly recognized genre, Kingston's and Tan's texts came under close scrutiny, resulting in a variety of criticisms that boiled down to two kinds:

- 1) While Kingston's and Tan's works include ample criticism of gender discrimination within their communities, they do not sufficiently criticize white racism.
- 2) Their forthright depiction of indigenous culture is liable to fetishization as exemplary Asian exotica.

The first criticism is not particularly new: a similar point was made by the *Aiiieeee!* group. Its importance, however, has become all the more highlighted because those who have raised this issue recently are feminist women critics, obviously reflecting a major change that has taken place in feminist scholarship of late, disrupting the previous tendency to prioritize the perspective of gender and stressing instead multiple ana-



lytical axes like race, class, and sexuality. Thus critics like Sau-ling Wong, Shirley Lim, and Leslie Bow all caution that these women writers' texts with their focus on matrilineality can possess the dangerous possibility of "containing questions of ethnic difference within a universal feminist resolution" and thus becoming "non-threatening" to mainstream readers.<sup>18</sup> The second criticism is obviously connected with the problem inherent in multiculturalism itself. As Trinh Minh-ha has noted, if multiculturalism means the mere juxtaposition of different ethnic cultures with each of their boundaries intact, it will simply end up solidifying those boundaries, hence further promoting their marginalization.<sup>19</sup> Especially in the case of Kingston and Tan, since the formulaic reading of their work as stories of a "mysterious" Asian American mother-daughter bond has become so widely accepted among mainstream readers, their novels can indeed easily be commodified as yet more neo-Orientalist exotica.

The text that is the most frequently cited as inviting and promoting baneful misconceptions in mainstream reception is Tan's widely marketed second novel *The Kitchen God's Wife*. In this work, "the socially monstrous phenomena of concubinage, abandoned daughters, arranged marriages, patriarchal abuse, and so forth" are represented as the essence of traditional Chinese culture.<sup>20</sup> This allows mainstream U.S. readers to indulge simultaneously in pity and self-congratulation: they can pity the Chinese immigrant mother for all the miseries she has to go through, but they can applaud her transformation into a brave new Asian American heroine, fleeing the "monstrous" Third World for an America full of progressiveness and Utopian possibility.

In this section, I have examined works by two Chinese American women writers, Kingston and Tan, as texts that can ultimately be linked with the *Aiiiiieee!* editors' attempt to construct a cultural nation as an Asian American space through their writing, an attempt that these women writers together could accomplish. I have also addressed the issue of the mainstream reception of their works, which undoubtedly has functioned as the major driving force in bringing the emergent genre of Asian American literature to the limelight. I have simultaneously called attention to the danger inherent in such reception—namely of having this once-proclaimed Asian American space reterritorialized by mainstream America as its readily accessible commodity. In the section to follow, I will deal with texts by diasporic women writers of Asian descent, mostly from the new immigrant generation, whose ingenious narrative strategies

can be regarded as their effort to avoid the pitfalls of the texts by preceding writers. I see their effort as an attempt to create a “Thirdspace,” or a space of hybridity.

#### IV HYBRIDITY AND DIASPORA: WORK BY MEENA ALEXANDER AND THERESA HAK KYUNG CHA

By “new immigrants,” I mean the more recent Asian immigrants who arrived in the U. S. from such diverse countries as Korea, India, Vietnam, Cambodia and the Philippines during the latter half of the 20th century—whose number increased drastically after the enactment of the new Immigration and Naturalization Act in 1970. Unlike the old immigrants from China and Japan during the 19th century, who were more intent on settling down in the U. S., the new immigrants of the late 20th century tend to be far more mobile. The majority are those people whom Edward Said has called the “exiles” of “our times”, or diasporic subjects who, having undergone forced displacement due to a variety of causes associated with the on-going condition called “post-coloniality”, and who continue their migration to whichever part of the globe that allows them to seek a better life or more opportunities.<sup>21</sup> Hence, it is no surprise that the writers coming from this group of “diasporic writers” show a new kind of subjectivity—far more fluid and multiple than the ones depicted in the texts I have cited above.

Indeed, the foregoing writers I have examined, even though their approaches were widely different, whether the *Aiiiiieee!* editors or the pair of Chinese American women writers, shared a basic common project of creating a viable image of “Asian Americans” as legitimate members of the U. S. as opposed to “permanent aliens.” Ironically, the efforts of both groups have been reappropriated by mainstream America: while the former proved to have internalized the norm of white masculinity, the latter fell in the trap of letting themselves become instrumental in the recirculation of Orientalist images of regressivity and inscrutability. In other words, even though those writers attempted to decolonize their allocated space as “permanent aliens” and establish instead their own independent Asian American spaces, they were, in effect, simply recolonized by hegemonic society. One factor in this might be that, despite the explicit intentions of their authors, the texts of both groups were still somewhat approachable within the framework of fixed binaries such as Asian/American, old/new, and regressive/progressive.

Hence, the important question for any writer of Asian descent in the

U.S. can be how to create a space that might enable movement beyond the confines of the foregoing binaries and yet maintain some form of cultural specificity—a space that is constantly on guard against any unifying, consolidating tendency from within, while simultaneously functioning as a cultural front from which to fight back against any exoticizing, essentializing move from without.

In this sense the texts by the two diasporic women writers I will deal with now, namely Meena Alexander who is of Indian descent and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha who is of Korean descent, are of particular importance. In their common endeavor to express their diasporic subjectivities which have emerged out of and through their shared border-crossing experiences, they both reveal the painful but meaningful process of their own search for the new kind of cultural space as mentioned above.

*Fault Lines* (1993), subtitled “A Memoir,” is Indian-born poet-writer Alexander’s first attempt at autobiographical writing. Having traversed four continents before reaching the U. S., the author still finds herself “in search of a homeland,” and it is to spell out some kind of wholeness or coherence in herself that she decided to write this memoir.

However, as soon as she starts writing, she becomes overwhelmed by the sheer difficulty of it. Because she has “mov[ed] about so much,” she feels that “time does not come fluid and whole to her,” and she keeps asking herself, “how should I spell out these fragments of a broken geography?”<sup>22</sup> Finally she reaches the recognition that she has no choice but to accept the idea of herself as “a mass of fault,” “a woman cracked by multiple migrations.”<sup>23</sup>

The result, as we see, is a different kind of autobiography. To be sure, like much autobiographical writing, *Fault Lines* traces the author’s different life-stages in different places: her childhood in India, her adolescence in Sudan, her student life in England, and finally her adult life in New York, where she settled down with her Caucasian American husband and her child, piecing together a variety of episodes concerning the people and places she came across on her life-journey. However, since she presents those episodes in a non-chronological manner, moving back and forth between the past and present throughout the text, the book escapes from the linear developmental narrative of traditional memoirs, in which the autobiographical subject invariably moves from ignorance to enlightenment, regressivity to progressivity, barbarity to civilization, etc.

Another notable aspect of Alexander’s narrative is that, as Helena

Grice has pointed out, in her emphasis on “matrilineal connection” as sources for her own inspiration and empowerment can be discerned the inevitable influence she has received from preceding women writers of Asian descent, particularly Maxine Kingston.<sup>24</sup> However, what makes Alexander’s text stand out is that she does not confine her maternal figure to just one person. She presents two women as her own maternal figures: her mother “Amma,” still alive in India while she was writing her memoir, and her maternal grandmother “Kunju,” who was already dead when the author was born, but whose face she could see in photos. They are both important figures to Alexander, albeit in different ways: Amma as an ever protective nurturer, who, after an arranged marriage, has continued to remain a devoted wife and mother like the majority of Indian women of her time; and Kunju as a spiritual nurturer, who, after her marriage to a member of the Nationalist Movement, continued to be active for women’s causes even after the birth of her daughter. Through juxtaposing the narratives of those two contrasting maternal figures, Alexander prevents mainstream readers from taking their ancestral female figures simply as a fixed, essentialized type.

Another feature worth noting is that the author more often than not expresses her feelings of doubt when she compares herself with those two maternal figures: she wonders with a sense of yearning what it would be like, had she followed in her mother’s footpath, to live in her village as a conventional wife and mother, even though she rebelled against her mother strongly. An even sharper feeling of yearning arises when she thinks of her other maternal figure Kunju, a woman who had precisely what she herself lacks, namely, “history and tradition,” since Kunju was a woman who witnessed “the birth pangs of a nation.”<sup>25</sup>

Eventually, however, we see the author reaching a new terrain of self-recognition based on her own multiple border-crossing experiences, which are painful in the sense that each time she crosses a new border, she is invariably hit by a sense of alienation, but exhilarating in the sense that each gives her a heightened sense of the differences among people in various parts of the world in terms of race, ethnicity, and nationality. One incident that gave her a huge “shock of recognition,” for example, happened while she was walking on a street in Minneapolis; a stranger halted her by yelling “you black bitch!”<sup>26</sup> To be sure, it was a paralyzing experience, but it was a catalytic one as well, for after that incident we see her world-view broadening drastically. As someone who has “learnt all over again about the violence of racism” in the U. S.,<sup>27</sup> she

comes to associate her own position as a “female, Indian, Other” with her “postcolonial heritage,” interrogating such transnational gender issues as clitoridectomy, arranged marriage and women’s education on top of such domestic racial issues as “Asian children in city schools” and “brown youths . . . who pack our city streets.”<sup>28</sup> In her emerging consciousness as a postcolonial feminist we see the birth of a new subjectivity that is neither unitary nor simply dual, but multiply anchored; she is led to an awareness of what Donna Haraway calls “new kinds of unity” among the oppressed people of the world, thereby disrupting the fixed binaries of East/West, Asia/America, and Third World/First World.<sup>29</sup> Thus we see the author no longer vexed with the lack of her own coherent historical past: she is celebrating “the perpetual present” associated with her own “dark female body” as a rich source for her sense of connectedness with variously marginalized people who live contemporaneously with her across the boundaries of race, nationality, and ethnicity.<sup>30</sup>

However, it should also be borne in mind that the author does not consider it easy to form such alliances. This is manifested in the scene described at the outset of the memoir. The author is sitting in a cozy café, talking with her editor-friend about the publication of her own book. Her eyes happen to catch the two blanket-covered men of color outside, one of whom suddenly comes “hobbling up, his hands stretched out” toward her.<sup>31</sup> Dropping her gaze instinctively to avoid the sight, she then glances at the plate glass which separates her from the two men, where she sees her own reflection, “face disfigured”. The scene is obviously a self-critical reminder against any facile talk of coalition-forming; the “distorted face” of the author obviously signifies her recognition of her own arrogance in regarding herself as an outsider when, to the eyes of the two homeless men, she is a privileged insider. The author thus cautions her readers against the naïve belief in the possibility of transparent spaces where any disenfranchised people can be homogenized into one seamless group; that even though the need should be recognized for transnational or transethnic alliances against any kind of injustices practiced in different parts of the world, one should not forget the differences existing among them not only in terms of gender and ethnicity but of class and social status as well. Hence we may say that the cultural space Alexander invokes in *Fault Lines* is never fixed. It is a site where contesting claims of differences are always foregrounded and renegotiated.

While *Fault Lines* seems to have had little difficulty in gaining critical

recognition, as suggested by the favorable comments at the back of its paperback edition by such well-known critics as Catherine Stimpson and Anita Desai, another text by a diasporic woman writer, the last writer to be dealt with here, namely *Dictée* by Korean-born poet-performer Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, received a hostile reaction from her critical community. When the book was published in 1982, it was largely ignored except by a handful of critics who mostly made cursory remarks on it, and it was virtually forgotten thereafter until 1991, when four Asian American scholars organized a panel focusing on the text at the annual meeting of the Association of Asian American Studies. The result of the panel was published in 1994 as an anthology titled *Writing Self, Writing Nation*, which gave rise to a subsequent proliferation of articles and essays.

One obvious reason why the acknowledgement of the literary worth of *Dictée* was so delayed was no doubt its avant-garde form: composed of personal letters, French dictation exercises, personal photos as well as photos of war scenes during the Second World War and other miscellaneous scraps of writing, the book escapes any attempt at categorization. On top that, its multilinguality is daunting: apart from English, we recognize Han-gul, Chinese, Japanese, French, Greek, and Latin scattered throughout the text. As Kim notes, since the majority of Asian American critics at the time were trying hard to “define and claim” a clear Asian American identity, the extremely heterogeneous form of *Dictée* appeared as a hindrance to their search.<sup>32</sup> The sudden shift in critical appraisal of *Dictée* in early 1990s is equally understandable: as Kim observes, the dramatic rise in new immigrants around the end of the 80s, which resulted in the “increased Asian American insistence” on their “complex, plural, and continually changing identities,” doubtlessly helped create a more receptive environment to the multi-form text.<sup>33</sup>

Hence, we should not consider *Dictée* as a mere exercise in the post-modern concept of endlessly shifting protean selves. As Laura Kang aptly argues, “the heterogeneous composition” of the text should be read as “accounting for multicultural, multinational pressures that have wrought the peculiar and crisscrossed contours of a Korean American female subject” who is shaped by the heterogeneous elements surrounding her:<sup>34</sup> Japanese colonialism, Korean militarism, U. S. imperialistic intervention into Korea leading to the Korean War and the country’s subsequent division into North and South, Cha’s immigration with her mother to Hawaii and to California, where she was to undergo the common

process of assimilation, her graduate study in France, and her sojourn in Korea, where she was treated as a cultural Other.

What differentiates *Dictée* from *Fault Lines* is that, while *Fault Lines* ends up celebrating the “perpetual present” associated with the author’s own transnational feminist self, *Dictée*’s subject is clearly concerned with recovering her own national past. In fact, the book is as much Cha’s attempt to explore her subjectivity as a postcolonial diasporic subject as her effort to reconstruct Korean national history. The reason for Cha’s persistent preoccupation with Korean history, despite her multiple border-crossing experiences has to be the fact that, as Kim notes, Korea has hardly figured in the West’s understanding of world history, while a country like India is far better-known in the West. However, one has to be vigilant about the familiar pitfall of the homogenizing, essentializing tendency whenever one attempts any retelling or recovery of a national narrative. Much of the complexity and ambiguity of the text of *Dictée*, I assume, derives from Cha’s strategic effort never to be caught in such a trap, and to create instead a kind of space that is ever open to multiplicity and change.

The most conspicuous among such strategies in Cha’s text is her inclusion of narratives usually neglected in official histories: a Korean coal-miner’s inscription in Han-gul in the earth of a coal-mine in Japan, for example, and a letter petitioning President Roosevelt for intervention in Japanese colonial rule (to which he did not respond). The most impressive of these unofficial narratives are the ones concerning two Korean women: Yu Guan Soon who joined the Korean male revolutionaries despite their strong opposition to allowing a woman membership, who eventually was tortured to death by the Japanese military, and Hyung Soon Huo, Cha’s own mother, a school teacher sent to Manchuria to teach the Japanese language, forbidden to use her own language, but speaking it silently in her head nevertheless. Thus Cha successfully presents an alternative history of Korean people not as mere passive victims but as people who possess their own agency, actively seeking to resist hegemonic powers.

It would be a mistake, though, to consider Cha as romanticizing the common Korean people and creating her own version of national heroines or heroes. What is most challenging about *Dictée* is that while it tries to recover the lost history of Korean people, it simultaneously problematizes the very way history is constructed, stressing the arbitrariness and unreliability of memory, and highlighting the fact that no such spaces



as pure inside or outside exist. This is suggested in the following passage in *Dictée*, which reminds us of Alexander's musing in the café scene:

The View, Absent all the same.  
 Hidden. Forbidden.  
 Either side of the view.  
 Side upon side. That which indicates the interior  
 and exterior.  
 Inside. Outside.<sup>35</sup>

In her endless journey for her lost homeland, which tends to be equated with the process of re-mem-bering her mother, we see once again the familiar pattern of a mother-daughter plot repeated. What should be noted, however, is that in Cha's case, the mother is presented from the beginning as an "impure" being, having been deprived of her own "mother" tongue, a woman whose existence is as hybrid and heterogeneous as that of her own daughter.

Thus we see the female subject in *Dictée* always located in a liminal space, where she shuttles incessantly between "inside" and "outside," blurring boundaries between all such binaries as Asia/America, national/transnational, and inside/outside. She is exactly what Trinh calls an "Inappropriate Other," a person who is not easily appropriated in either of the occupied territories.<sup>36</sup> This interstitial space, or "Thirdspace," as Edward Soja has called it,<sup>37</sup> is the very legacy Cha tries to pass down to her fellow Asian Americans or, for that matter, anyone living in the present age in which diasporic imagination is more required than at any other time in the past.

## V CONCLUSION: ASIAN AMERICAN LITERATURE AS THIRDSPACE

I would like to end by cautioning that even the space of hybridity or interstitiality that has been examined here contains a chance of being appropriated by hegemonic powers, for anything once named can always be changed into another fetishized and commodified object. In fact, there has been some criticism of late against so-called "hybridity talk."<sup>38</sup> It argues that dealing with hybridity has become a mere fashion, and that it has no actual power to solve problems arising from the ongoing racial and gender imbalance in society. I both agree and disagree with this argument. What I believe is most important is never to fix one's viewpoint



with either side for too long. For, through shuttling between inside and outside, one can always self-reflexively criticize outside from inside, inside from outside and so on, or as King-kok Cheung says:

Individuals may feel empowered by an ethnic American identity, by a diasporic identity, or by both . . . An Asian American consciousness . . . has allowed some writers to rupture a racist and patriarchal definition of an American nationalistic identity. . . . Similarly, an exilic or diasporic identity can enable others to contest the exclusiveness of state or cultural nationalism . . . To reckon with these sometimes contradictory stances is . . . to make room for reciprocal critique and multiple commitments.<sup>39</sup>

A multi-text like *Dictée*, or to a lesser degree *Fault Lines*, can itself be regarded as forming in-between spaces, disrupting binaries like poetry/prose, literature/theory, fiction/fact, art/politics, memory/history, and so on. The fact that there are quite a few multi-texts in Asian American literature besides the ones examined here, such as Jessica Hagedorn's *Dogeaters*, Karen Tei Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rainforest*, and Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, is a testimony to the fact that Asian American literature can form such a space of hybridity, or Thirdspace. These texts can indicate the way to what Lefevre designates as "a planet-wide space," the one that contains the most hope for the future. As he observes in the conclusion of his seminal work *Production of Space*:

The creation (or production) of a planet-wide space as the social foundation of a transformed everyday life open to myriad possibilities—such is the dawn now beginning to break on the far horizon.<sup>40</sup>

We can hope with Lefevre, then, that from this space of Asian American literature will emanate the power to transform our consciousnesses and continuously widen our horizons.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), 5.

<sup>2</sup> See R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1955).

<sup>3</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992), 47.

<sup>4</sup> Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts* (Durham: Duke UP, 1996), 13. It should be noted that other non-white groups in the U.S. were allowed the right of becoming naturalized citizens earlier than those of Asian origin. For example, "persons of African nativity and descent" were allowed their right in 1870, while those of Chinese and Japanese origins were allowed only in 1943 and 1952 respectively.

<sup>5</sup> Henri Lefevre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 3, 49.

<sup>6</sup> Lowe, 4.

<sup>7</sup> I became acquainted with the concept of “Thirdspace” mainly through: Edward W. Soja’s *Thirdspace: Journey to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 5. See also Homi Bhaba, “The Third Space,” *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. J. Rutherford (New York: Routledge, 1990), 207–21. As for the relationship of space with gender and ethnicity, the following books have been particularly helpful: Susan Stanford Friedman, *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998); Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis, U of Minneapolis P, 1994); Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* (Durham: Duke UP, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> Bruce Iwasaki, “Response and Change for the Asian America,” *Roots: An Asian American Reader* (Regents of U of California, 1971), 89.

<sup>9</sup> Frank Chin, et al. eds. *Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (Washington, DC: Howard UP, 1974), viii–ix.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* xxx.

<sup>11</sup> Madhu Dubey, *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994), 14–15.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 1.

<sup>13</sup> Frank Chin, “Act I of *The Chikencoop Chinaman*,” *Aiiieeeee!*, 50–74; John Okada, “From *No-No Boy*,” *Aiiieeeee!*, 130–140.

<sup>14</sup> Elaine Kim, *Asian American Literature* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1982), 177.

<sup>15</sup> Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior* (New York: Knopf, 1975); Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* (New York: Putnam, 1991).

<sup>16</sup> One illustration of this might be the fact that when an exhibition of Japanese American History was held by the National Japanese American Historical Society in the U.S., men tended to emphasize their contribution as nisei soldiers during the Second World War, while women preferred to display traditional Japanese objects for daily use. See “Nikkei Josei no Rekishiten” [Exhibition of Japanese American Women’s History] *Asahi Shinbun*, 21 July, 1990.

<sup>17</sup> For the most extensive analysis of the mother-daughter bond in the literature that was produced during the 1970s and 80s, see Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother-Daughter Plot* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989).

<sup>18</sup> Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, “Chinese American Literature,” *Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, ed. King-Kok Cheung (New York: Cambridge UP, 1997), 50. Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “Immigrants and Diaspora,” *Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, 302. Leslie Bow, “Cultural Conflict/Feminist Resolution In Amy Tan’s *Joy Luck Club*,” *Asian American Women Writers*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1997), 92–3.

<sup>19</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 232.

<sup>20</sup> Lim, 301.

<sup>21</sup> Edward Said, “Reflections on Exile,” *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture*, ed. Trinh T. Minh-ha and Cornel West et al. (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1991), 357–66.

<sup>22</sup> Meena Alexander, *Fault Lines* (New York: Feminist P, 1993), 3.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 3.

<sup>24</sup> Helena Grice “*Fault Lines* [book review],” *Amerasia Journal*, 22. 2 (1996): 165.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 15.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 169.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 199.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 202.

<sup>29</sup> Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," *Coming to Terms*, ed. Elizabeth Weed (New York: Routledge, 1989), 196.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 169.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 1.

<sup>32</sup> Elaine Kim, "Poised on the In-between: A Korean American's Reflections on Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*," *Writing Self, Writing Nation*, ed. Elaine Kim and Norma Alarcom (Berkeley: Third Woman's Press, 1994), 3.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 7.

<sup>34</sup> Laura Kang, "*Dictée* by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha," *A Resource Guide to Asian American Literature*, eds. Stephen Sumida and Sau-ling Wong (New York: Modern Language Association, 2001), 32–33.

<sup>35</sup> Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictée* (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1995), 127.

<sup>36</sup> Trinh, 76.

<sup>37</sup> Soja, 5. Elaine Kim also maintains that in *Dictée*, "Cha creates and celebrates a kind of third space, an exilic space" ("Poised on the In-between," 8).

<sup>38</sup> John Hutnik "Hybridity Saves? Authenticity and/or the Critique of Appropriation," *Amerasia Journal* 25. 3 (1999/2000): 39.

<sup>39</sup> King-Kok Cheung, "Re-viewing Asian American Literary Studies," *Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, 9–10.

<sup>40</sup> Lefevre, 422.