Editors’ Introduction: Critical Perspectives on Asian American Children’s Literature

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Once when our group [of Girl Reserves] was to be photographed for the local newspaper . . . the photographer casually tried to ease me out of the picture. I knew why, and so did Sylvia. “Come on, Yoshi,” she said, grabbing my arm. “Stand next to me.” We linked arms and stood firm. “Smile,” the photographer said with a dour look. And standing together in our white middies and skirts and our blue Girl Reserves ties, Sylvia and I smiled.

— (Yoshiko Uchida, The Invisible Thread 55)

This incident from Yoshiko Uchida’s girlhood, described in her memoir for children, The Invisible Thread, is emblematic of her own experience as a writer and of other Asian American children’s writers. To a large extent, they have been so eased out of the canonical picture that it is a surprise to hear that their work was first published over one hundred years ago, starting with Sui Sin Far’s “Tales of Chinese Children,” and that Dhan Gopal Mukerji, the first Asian American to win the Newbery Medal, did so in 1928. These overlooked or forgotten writers continually show us how the story of Asian American writers has been marked by various forms of marginalization and erasure, and reshaped by their attempts to make themselves visible. The Newbery Medal winners for 2002 and 2005 respectively, Linda Sue Park’s A Single Shard, set in the medieval Korea of her ancestors, and Cynthia Kadohata’s Kira-Kira, taking place in a Japanese American family in the 1950s, are harbingers of a fuller acceptance of the Asian and Asian American presence in American children’s literature, but the struggles that have brought about the change in the cultural landscape are still ongoing. A look at the presence of Asia and Asian America in the Newbery awards is instructive: Mukerji’s 1928 winner, Gay-Neck: The Story of a Pigeon, featuring an Indian carrier pigeon used in World War
I, had a decidedly Orientalist flavor, as did a string of Medal and Honor winners from the 1920s and 1930s written by non-Asian writers focusing on the exotic East, like *Pigtail of Ah Lee Ben Loo* by John Bennett (1929), *Young Fu of the Upper Yangtze* by Elizabeth Foreman Lewis (1933), and *Pageant of Chinese History* by Elizabeth Seeger (1935). The first work to present a significant portrayal of the Asian American presence, dealing with Asians and their lives in America, was Laurence Yep’s *Dragonwings*, Newbery Honor winner for 1976. Another of Yep’s works, *Dragon’s Gate*, was a Newbery Honor winner in 1994. The Newbery experience is just one way of seeing how these writers are still engaged in constructing their place in a picture that, in spite of schools’ vaunted embrace of multicultural education, in spite of what has been called “the ongoing multiculturalization of children’s literature” (Bader 275), can still look discouragingly monocultural.

Asian American children’s literature, far more than a “lite,” miniaturized version of the larger issues in ethnic literature, must be read as a multilayered and nuanced attempt to establish the place of Asian American writers for children in American culture, and to creatively engage their marginal positioning. These writers have grown up in a world that has long deemed them inassimilable aliens who have no place in the master narratives of American history. In the face of all their attempts at acculturation, whether they have lived in America for one generation or four, they are still seen as foreigners who will never melt into the “melting pot.” While the old term has long been discredited in discourse about multiculturalism, the popular assumption that ethnic Americans should blend into the landscape by subsuming any characteristics that make them appear different is still very much alive. Ominously, the supposed failure to assimilate can be seen as a defect of will, an indication of bad faith on the part of the “foreigner,” and a threat to the functioning of society. The Asian American child, as the ultimate fifth column, has long been seen as even more of a threat: in 1921, Vice President Calvin Coolidge, warned that “the unassimilated alien child menaces our children” (qtd. in Prchal 189). As president, fostering a policy that restricted immigration, especially from Asia, Coolidge was to repeat the dictum that “America must be kept American” (1923 State of the Union Address). Decades later, these attitudes are finding new currency, with Yale Law School professor Kenji Yoshino warning that even liberals like Arthur Schlesinger are now calling for “recommitment to the ethic of assimilation” (35); Schlesinger’s call does not sound very different from conservative warnings such as *The Unmaking of Americans: How Multiculturalism Has Undermined the Assimilation Ethic*. Asian American children are thus caught in a triple bind: pressured to remain faithful to ancestral heritage, while at the same
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time admonished to assimilate and become fully American, but ultimately finding that because of their Asian genes, many Americans will never give them full acceptance. All too often, “children and adolescents who belong to ethnic minorities are likely to have experienced the aggression of the dominant culture” (Trites 67). This does not stop them from dreaming; Laurence Yep’s essay in this volume, “Paying with Shadows,” points out that in immigrant history the American continent has been imagined as the place “where self-activated and self-determined transformations become the bedrock of history and myth.” (162) The interplay of these pressures and dreams has shaped and defined this literature, creating what critic Katherine Capshaw Smith, in an overview of ethnic children’s literature, summarizes as a “complexity in the ways writers construct history and negotiate the demands of various audiences” (4).

The project of writing the story of the ethnic presence in America and the evolution of cultural identity has a particular resonance in children’s literature, with its tendency to focus on issues of selfhood in the context of family, peers, and community while experiencing rejection and discovering the ways of society. It is well worth noting that “we cannot tell the story of ethnic American writing without the voice of children’s literature” (Smith 66). Equally important, the Asian American experience, especially that of its children, brings its own specific adumbration to these issues. Finding themselves displaced as children, these writers focus on recentering their experience, creating a discourse that enables children to find their place in the picture of the American cultural landscape. Growing up and seeing themselves as forming part of the rich traditional cultures of their ancestral heritage, they are often invisible in the country where they are growing up, trying to be part of the white majority or of the “model minority” and thus being exemplary at blending in, keeping quiet, and knowing their place. As adults looking back on their childhood selves, they write their own story rather than letting others write them out of it; they reposition themselves as central to the American experience rather than peripheral. More importantly, they present their narrative as an integral part of the multilayered tapestry of the “American” experience, rather than as a belated addition. Refusing to remain an anecdotal subplot, colorful but peripheral, they weave themselves into the plot of the story of American childhood.

The complex representations of Asians in American literature show a movement from nonrepresentation through stereotyping to representations with more basis in reality, more multifaceted and inclusive. Many Asian Americans may have tried to hide through acculturation or to camouflage their foreignness through the dubious distinction of quasi-whiteness conferred by the model minority label; the invisibility of real Asians and Asian Americans in popular culture is also due in large part
to the stereotypes that overshadow them. Elaine Kim’s groundbreaking work, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and their Social Context* (1982), explicates the evolution of Asian American consciousness and self-image as reflected in the literature. To do this, her work examines the crude caricatures against which Asian American writers contended in the early twentieth century, notably Charlie Chan and Fu Manchu. Asian American children’s literature is working in its own way to replace the stereotypical depictions of the Asians and Asian Americans that children know best, as in what used to pass for Asian American literature, like the pseudo-folktales *The Five Chinese Brothers* with the title characters’ identical features and slanted eyes, or *Rikki Tikki Tembo* with a nonsensical “Chinese” name that has no connection to Chinese at all. Just as pernicious are the current images of popular culture—on television, The Simpsons’ egregious Apu Nahasapeemapetilon, the store manager who is “Indian” in nothing but his accent, or in film, Disney’s *Mulan*, a project that announced with much fanfare its use of authentic Chinese myth and setting but that exploits the martial arts caricature as well as reverting to the old Fu Manchu-like villains. The Karate Kids of film, both male and female, are not even Asian American, and in *Karate Kid 2*, the Asians are the villains to be overcome by superior American force, intelligence, and virtue.

Part of the process of erasure is the tendency to lump all Asian ethnic groups together, obliterating their differences and assuming a monolithic alien culture, as if they were all part of a single, faceless, invading Mongol horde. The impression of their foreignness is so persistent that even though Asian American writers have been at work for generations, educated readers can still ask whether they write in English or whether their work is translated from another language. There is no conception of the rich diversity of cultures and historical experiences represented by Asian American writers—some of them first generation immigrants, Koreans or Taiwanese still closely tied to Confucian or Buddhist traditions, others, recent refugees from Cambodia and Vietnam, severed from their homelands by violence, trying to preserve the heritage of the countries from which they had to flee. Other first generation immigrants, like Filipinos, may be more acculturated because of the history of Western colonization in their culture of origin. Then there are the numerous Americans of Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino descent that have lived here for several generations, and are trying to find a link between old and new, dealing with their history as railroad workers, labor unionists, or internees in World War II camps. Others still, from China, Korea, or India, are living the involuntary immigration of adoption and making their own identity as Asian children
with white parents in what are sometimes called “conspicuous families.” However, linking this wide variety of experiences are strong bonds of commonality, as in the shared experience of otherness among these writers as they struggle to define themselves and create a picture that stresses their individuality.

The literary establishment and publishing industry present additional obstacles to the visibility of Asian Americans. Sandra Yamate points out that in the reviewing process, ethnic children’s literature is all too often read by editors and reviewers with little insight into the multicultural issues involved; Asian American literature in particular suffers because of the lack of familiarity with the many cultures in question, and the reviewers’ application of monocultural criteria that are supposedly universal standards (101). The proliferation of folktales meant to teach Americans about Asian cultures instead reinforces and perpetuates the stereotype of Asians as exotic foreigners (96). The educational establishment’s required use of multicultural texts in the K–12 classroom, while positive in its recognition of diversity, has also fostered uncritical, untheorized examinations. There is little recognition of the darker side of multiculturalism, of its genesis in the recognition of oppression of ethnic groups by the mainstream as implied in Donnarae MacCann’s definition: “Multiculturalism addresses the warfare waged against specific groups of people—armed warfare, plus aggression implemented through forced labor and forced acculturation” (341). Instead, benign myths about multiculturalism abound, such as the attitude that all children’s books about other cultures can be read as authentic representations of those cultures, and the phenomenon of “tourist-multiculturalism,” which approaches ethnic works as pleasant detours away from the main curriculum. (Aldridge, Calhoun, and Aman) The work of Asian Americans, because of the general readership’s lack of knowledge of the ethnic groups they represent, is more vulnerable to these misuses.

The use of multicultural works in the K–12 classroom and in college-level Children’s Literature courses has encouraged literary research on these texts; because of the needs of this type of audience, (primarily educators seeking classroom materials) much of this work consists of summaries, booklists, annotated bibliographies, and teachers’ guides. Also, with the preponderance of African American, Latino, and Native American texts, the work of Asian Americans can be relegated to the background. These guides tend to approach the texts as tools to teach about cultural heritage and assimilation, and thus contain little real analysis. In-depth criticism and interpretation of the field as a whole is rare; some overviews appear as chapters in books about multicultural literature. Studies on individual
Asian American children’s writers, examining their works as literary productions, have been appearing in academic journals for the past two decades, including a number of fine examples in this journal.\textsuperscript{4} MELUS recently devoted a special issue (2002) to ethnic American children’s literature, containing four articles that mentioned Asian American writers.\textsuperscript{5} Children’s Literature Association Quarterly’s 2003 special issue on multiculturalism has two articles that mention Asian American writers.\textsuperscript{6} This Lion and Unicorn special issue is the first to focus specifically on Asian American writers, gather a significant number of articles, and provide a comprehensive overview; as well as attempt to provide a variety of approaches to the issues of literary production and a range of analyses of literary strategies.

The texts featured in this volume are among those that have creatively engaged the challenges of presenting themselves within the Asian American experience. Two authors who have reflected on and articulated the issues of writing for children as Asian Americans are Laurence Yep and Yoshiko Uchida. One of their strategies is to “stress the palimpsestic formation of ethnic Americans, and engage their relationship with their heritage culture as well as with the society they live in, a strategy that successfully dispels stereotypical images of Asians.” (Davis, “Ethnic Autobiography” 90–91) As one of the earlier Asian American writers, Uchida was influential in forming a consciousness of the needs of the audiences whom she hoped would read her work. Her writing becomes her way of transmitting that legacy of ethnic appreciation to the Sansei—the third generation Japanese Americans—“to give them the kinds of books I’d never had as a child. The time was right, for now the world too, was changing [. . . ] I wanted to give the young Sansei a sense of continuity and knowledge of their own remarkable history [. . . ] I hoped all young Americans would read these books as well” (131). Laurence Yep finds in his writing a form of self-transformation and avenue to understanding the consequences of ethnicity; through it he makes a place for himself in the complex Chinese American society he lived in:

I was the Chinese American raised in a black neighborhood, a child who had become too American to fit into Chinatown and too Chinese to fit elsewhere. I was the clumsy son of an athletic family, the grandson of a Chinese grandmother who spoke more of West Virginia than of China. When I wrote, I went from being a puzzle to a puzzle solver. I could reach into the box of rags that was my soul and begin stitching them together. Moreover, I could try out different combinations to see which one pleased me the most. I could take these different elements, each of which belonged to something else, and dip them into my imagination where they were melted down and cast into new shapes so that they became uniquely mine. (The Lost Garden 91).
The essays in this volume explore a variety of genres within children’s literature: bilingual texts, illustrations, folktales, adolescent literature, fantasy, autobiography. They identify and analyze the multiple strategies used by Asian American writers in their self-construction of a viable identity that is presented as both ethnic and American. Two essays in this volume examine the use of illustrations and of bilingual texts that present Asian and Asian American backdrops. Lan Dong, in “Writing Chinese America into Words and Images: Storytelling and Re-telling of The Song of Mu Lan,” focuses on Jeanne Lee’s retelling of the ancient legend, remythicizing and particularizing a version of the tale that uses Chinese setting and calligraphy in its illustrations, to construct a retelling that connects Chinese American children with their heritage, rather than distancing them as the totalizing and homogenizing Disney version does. Melinda de Jesús performs a similar analysis, in “‘The sound of bamboo planted deep inside them:’ Reclaiming Filipino American History and Identity in Lakas and the Manilatown Fish.” This essay shows how Anthony Robles, using illustration and bilingual text that evoke the sights and sounds of San Francisco’s Manilatown, recreates the early immigrant community of Filipino bachelors, and finds a continuity in their relationship with Filipino American children.

Two essays focus on genres that Asian American writers have reconfigured and adapted in response to the special needs of their history and audience: fantasy and autobiography. In “Toward a Poetics of Asian American Fantasy: Laurence Yep’s Construction of a Bicultural Mythology,” Celestine Woo traces Yep’s achievement in creating a new mode of fantasy that, unlike the Eurocentric fantasies most current in children’s literature, uses Chinese myth and acknowledges Asian American reality, grounded in places like Chinatown and in the lives of Chinese Americans. Rocío Davis, in “Asian American Autobiography for Children: Critical Paradigms and Creative Practice,” conducts an exploration of the diversity of experiences of Asian Americans reflected in their autobiographies, presenting a range of possibilities to expand reader awareness of the meaning of being Asian in America, to offer Asian American children plural models for their processes of personal and cultural identification.

The experience of adolescents, with its focus on identity formation, also forms a major theme in this collection. Rahpee Thongthiraj, in “Negotiated Identities and Female Personal Space in Thai American Adolescent Literature,” problematizes Thai female subjectivity in the context of familial bonds, relocation, heritage, and past and present selves; it focuses on the grandmother-granddaughter bond, which is often overlooked in American culture but central in Thai culture. “The Cultural Production of Asian American Young Adults in the Novels of Marie G. Lee, An Na,
and Doris Jones Yang” contains Monica Chiu’s analysis of young adults’ battle against restrictive stereotypes, including ways that their struggle can be thwarted, not only by authority figures in homes and schools but even by agents of cultural production, the publishing houses in whose interest it is to promote a tamed, defanged representation of these battling characters.

The essays in this collection, while necessarily limited by space constraints, can also expand outward by serving as introduction and invitation to further studies—on more major writers like Allen Say, on the literature of additional ethnic groups like South Asians, on the exploration of the impact of a greater range of historical events and on themes like adoption, hybridity, and multiracial children. The mission of establishing Asian American children’s literature as a central part of the American literary consciousness is still far from complete. The compelling stories that these writers are creating about their remarkable histories and lives have more than earned them a place in the cultural landscape of America; critical studies can honor their commitment and their work by reaffirming their visibility, pulling them into the center of the picture and encouraging them to stand firm.

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**Notes**

1The case of _Dragonwings_ is a story in itself; it certainly deserved the lesser Honor award, and many readers would find it as deserving of the Newbery Medal as other medal winners and as the medal winner for that year, Susan Cooper’s _The Grey King_, a mainstream work with a background from Arthurian legend. This assessment is reflected in the Children’s Literature Association 1995 Phoenix Award, given to _Dragonwings_. This award was designed by the Children’s Literature Association for books published twenty years earlier that did not receive any major award; presumably this shows that the Association felt that the Newbery Honor award, often considered major, was not a major award given the book’s merits. Interestingly, the other Newbery Honor book for 1976, _The Hundred Penny Box_ by Sharon Bell Mathis, was also a work of ethnic literature, focusing on an African American family.
The issue of invisibility, scarcely confined to works of literature, extends to related fields. An examination of concerns related to immigrant children summarizes some of the problems and larger implications: “Research on immigrant children and families can throw light on the issues affecting these populations, removing them from obscurity and validating their experiences. In addition, as the composition of America changes, it is crucial that ongoing research reflect these changes; excluding immigrant children from research will render existing studies of so-called mainstream populations increasingly unrepresentative.” (“Immigrant Children” 84)

“It’s a pretty sad statement that the most well-known Indian character in popular culture is Apu from The Simpsons,” says Executive Director Debasish Mishra, executive director of the Washington, D.C.-based India Abroad Center for Political Awareness (IACPC) (Chan CO 3).


The issue contains articles by Martha Cutter, on Sui Sin Far, Jarasa Kanok, on Thai texts in the United States, Rocío G. Davis, on Laurence Yep, and Leona W. Fisher, on Laurence Yep.

The issue contains articles by Melinda de Jesús on Marie Lee and Rocío G. Davis on Laurence Yep.

Works Cited


