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On Recovering Early Asian American Literature

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*On Recovering Early Asian American Literature**Floyd Cheung*

While the term “Asian American” was not coined until the 1960s, immigrants from Asia and their descendants have lived in the United States and contributed to American culture for more than a century. In spite of legislative and cultural attempts to exclude and silence them, some left a literary legacy in the form of published works, unpublished manuscripts, and even carvings on prison walls. To say the least, writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries worked under difficult conditions. Dominant racist attitudes tended to perceive them as either “bad” Asians who required exclusion from the United States or “good” Asians who could offer access to the exotic East.¹ Consequently, few had access to publication at all, and those who did publish in mainstream markets had to modulate their work to meet expectations, though some had subversive agendas. Work that fell too far outside of supposed norms had to be self-published or never saw the light of day. Almost all of these verbal traces lay dormant, and some passed out of existence not long after they were written because no academic field and few libraries had seen fit to preserve them.

Since the birth of Asian American studies in the early 1970s, however, scholars have begun to recover this legacy. Depending on the particular project, recovery has meant unearthing forgotten writings, revaluing discounted or discredited texts, or rethinking the sociopolitical context of works. Anthologists and editors have played a major role by making the case for, and facilitating the republication or first-time publication of, these works, as the case may be. Recovered early texts attest to the fact that Asian Americans have a longer history in the United States than some people assume when they scream “Go back to where you came from!” as though home could not possibly be here. Furthermore, these texts counter the notion perpetuated by the model minority stereotype that Asian Americans are essentially docile and demure. Mira Cheiko Shimabakuro explains, “For those of us who have always hoped that our communities were not simply a group of ‘Quiet Americans’ . . . recovering the written words of

this resistant legacy can potentially help restore the psychic wholeness we need to engage in contemporary struggles of our own.”² Recovering early texts, then, is not merely an academic exercise; the past can energize the present. And regardless of whether a particular text is deemed politically resistant by contemporary critics, all of them count as evidence of verbal creativity – assertions of generativity and presence in and of themselves. Turn-of-the-twentieth-century poet Sadakichi Hartmann wrote the following in longhand, which never saw publication during his lifetime:

If words of mine
Own strength to live
Centuries hence, man's mind
May tune in on their scatter and drift—

Figure 1 Excerpt from the Sadakichi Hartmann Papers, Special Collections, University of California, Riverside.

He recorded these words with ink and paper. Yet we need the means to “tune in on their scatter and drift.”³ Recovery workers provide such means by finding, editing, framing, and annotating lost or underappreciated texts.

From the beginning, scholars working on recovery have differed in their motives, criteria, and constraints. After all, none of us is free from personal biases such as our tastes and politics or practical limitations such as access to resources (time, money, archives) and language proficiency. Furthermore, decisions made by press executives can trump the preferences of recovery workers. For instance, while the editors of *Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Asian American Writers* (1974) were grateful to Howard University Press for publishing their collection when no one else would (“blacks were quicker to understand and appreciate the value of Asian American writing than whites”), the press prevented them from including any poetry.⁴ Fortunately, they found an outlet for poetry in volume three, the “Asian American issue,” of *Yardbird Reader* (1974). In addition, none of us is unaffected by our historical moment and social context. “Literary history is never an innocent process of recovery,” Cary Nelson reminds us. “We recover what we are culturally and psychologically prepared to recover.”⁵ Over time – via a process shot through with desire and debate – anthologists, editors, and scholarly interpreters have expanded and diversified the canon of Asian American literature to include a wider range of

ethnicities, genders, sexualities, languages, genres, politics, and aesthetic sensibilities. And the work of recovery and debate about significance ought to continue. As David Palumbo-Liu maintains, “an ethnic canon should be always in revision and contestation.”⁶ This chapter historicizes and surveys a selection of Asian American recovery work mostly from 1970 to 1995 with an eye toward how this work has helped shape the field at the same time that trends have influenced what literature gets recovered.

Pioneering Anthologies, Persistent Debates

In the early 1970s, Houghton Mifflin Company published *Forgotten Pages of American Literature* (1970), edited by Gerald Haslam, and *Asian-American Authors* (1972), edited by Kai-yu Hsu and Helen Palubinskas. The former featured eleven Asian American writers under the rubric “The Subtle Thread: Asian-American Literature” next to sections on other ethnic American literatures. The latter appeared as part of a four-volume series on “Multi-Ethnic Literature.” These anthologies undoubtedly served a readership awakened by the Civil Rights, Asian American, and other ethnic studies movements of the 1960s.⁷ Both books make the case that, while ethnic American authors may have been overlooked, they belong to an American tradition which includes not only Walt Whitman but also Langston Hughes, who wrote “I, too, sing America. / I am the darker brother. / . . . I, too, am America.”⁸

Gerald Haslam himself graduated from San Francisco State University, site of the Third World Student Strikes, during which students demanded the establishment of Asian American, African American, Chicano, and Native American studies. At the time of the strikes in 1968, Haslam was an assistant professor of English and ethnic studies at Sonoma State College, just fifty miles north of San Francisco. *Forgotten Pages* was his first book-length publication. An example of scholarly activism, this anthology intervened in the field of “American literary scholarship [which] has traditionally tended to reflect the social and racial prejudices of the nation’s dominant white majority.”⁹ Having introduced ethnic American works into a predominantly white canon, Haslam insisted nonetheless that the authors he selected “have one important common denominator: they are Americans; otherwise it is their diversity and individuality that is most noteworthy.”¹⁰ True to this statement, his selections of Asian American literature range from poems by the Japanese American educator S. I. Hayakawa, to an autobiographical work by the Filipino American worker-activist Carlos Bulosan, to a short story by the Chinese American

writer Lee Yu-Hwa, to a novel excerpt by the Korean American soldier Richard Kim. Haslam cannot help himself from expressing some disappointment, however: “Most literary work by Asian-Americans is written in English and is clearly Western in technique, reflecting very little non-European influence.”¹¹ His introduction oddly yet tellingly quotes from Yin-dynasty Chinese poets and tenth-century Japanese novelists before concluding that “it is not on the level of genre that most Asian-Americans have contributed to our national literature. . . . Rather, it has been in simply giving words to their own particular . . . experiences in America.”¹² Hence, Haslam’s otherwise laudable inclusion of Asian American voices comes at the cost of some faint praise. This framing statement also reinforces the problematic notion that Asian American literature should be valued for sociological rather than aesthetic reasons, its authors identified as conveyers of “experience,” not as artists in a “genre.”

Of course, the literature itself belies Haslam’s judgment. For instance, José Garcia Villa’s poem “Be Beautiful, Noble, Like the Antique Ant” could be about Asian American experience, but it also plays with questions of identity through its masterful orchestration of sound and image. Note the beauty and wit of the final stanza:

Trace the tracelessness of the ant,
Every ant has reached this perfection.
As he comes, so he goes,
Flowing as water flows,
Essential but secret like a rose.¹³

The exquisitely rendered tension here between presence and absence, being and transcendence speaks for, to, and beyond Asian American experience.

Published two years later, Kai-yu Hsu and Helen Palubinkas’s *Asian-American Authors* also valued lived experience (they privileged those “who have had extensive living experience in America”) at the same time that the literature itself almost always exceeds editors’ attempts to harness it. Nevertheless, Hsu and Palubinkas were particularly drawn to writers who grappled with questions of identity, ultimately selecting a range of writers who “define the term Asian-American in different ways.”¹⁴ Hence they embraced Virginia Lee, who “is not so concerned about being either Chinese or American or Chinese-American or American-Chinese as she is about being human,” as well as Frank Chin, who insists “I’m a Chinaman.”¹⁵ Hsu and Palubinkas also featured a variety of genres and made an attempt at historical reach. Their earlier selections included, for instance, an autobiography by Jade Snow Wong, poems by José Garcia Villa, and a short story by

Toshio Mori. Their contemporary selections featured, as it turns out, work by all of the editors of the 1974 *Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Asian American Writers* – Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong. These four, perhaps, bristled at the capaciousness of Hsu and Palubinskas's choices, since they went on to exclude from their anthology Jade Snow Wong, among others, as overly assimilated. Whereas the *Aiiieeeee!* editors would later make an argument about how to be a “real” Asian American via their text selections and prefatory matter, Hsu and Palubinskas seemed to want to spark a conversation via the diversity of authors they included as well as with suggested topics “for discussion” following each author's work. After Inada's poems, for instance, readers are prompted to “give a careful description of how you think the speaker regards his own ethnic identity.”¹⁶ *Asian-American Authors*, while not often cited today, surely launched many discussions during its time.

Three anthologies, all published in 1974, continued the work of recovering Asian American literature: *Asian-American Heritage: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry*, edited by David Hsin-Fu Wand; *Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Asian American Writers*, edited by Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong; and volume three of the *Yardbird Reader*, guest edited by Frank Chin and Shawn Wong. Interestingly, these path-breaking anthologies launched debates that have persisted about the boundaries of the field. The first concerns the question of identity.¹⁷ For example, in his introduction Wand wonders rhetorically, “What is an Asian-American?” and comments, perhaps following Hsu and Palubinskas, “The answer is by no means a simple and clear-cut one.”¹⁸ In contrast, Frank Chin et al. declare definitively that “Asian American . . . means Filipino, Chinese, and Japanese Americans” who are “American born and raised.”¹⁹ Even the latter's choice to omit the hyphen in the term “Asian American” is not incidental. On the one hand, Wand's usage of a hyphen signifies balance between “Asian” and “American.” On the other hand, Chin et al.'s usage of a space emphasizes “American.” Maxine Hong Kingston explains, for example, “We ought to leave out the hyphen in ‘Chinese-American,’ because the hyphen gives the word on either side equal weight. . . . Without the hyphen, ‘Chinese’ is an adjective and ‘American’ a noun; a Chinese American is a type of American.”²⁰ Hence Wand's choice to use the hyphen supports his decision not to define “Asian-American” in a “clear-cut” way. His anthology therefore can include not only US-born, Anglophone writers like Hisaye Yamamoto but also immigrant writers like Younghill Kang and even non-English

selections of Polynesian oral poetry. Chin et al. opt for the space to underscore their commitment to recovering only “American born and raised” writers. Consequently, *Aiiieeeee!* also includes Hisaye Yamamoto but no immigrants. Even though Carlos Bulosan was born in the Philippines, he is included because the Philippines were a US colony at the time. Moreover, their excerpt from Bulosan’s autobiographical novel, *America Is in the Heart*, emphasizes his experiences in the United States. While Bulosan’s book begins in the Philippines, Chin et al. reprint the part about the protagonist’s work and travels in California, Alaska, and Washington. In retrospect we can perceive that editorial choices made by Wand and Chin et al. foreshadow the dialectic later identified by King-Kok Cheung between “writing diaspora” and “claiming America.”²¹

Besides disagreeing on the question of who can be considered an Asian American author, these early works of literary recovery also differ on questions of aesthetics and politics. While Howard University Press did not allow the inclusion of any poetry in *Aiiieeeee!*, *Asian-American Heritage* contains a great deal of poetry. Wand even included eight of his own poems written under the penname David Rafael Wang. Among these is “Quartet for Gary Snyder,” which originally appeared in the mainstream poetry journal *New York Quarterly* in 1971. It begins:

At the Reservoir
Italian boys
run
naked, showing off
their tans,
blond
girls catch
sunlight.²²

Wang’s work echoes Gary Snyder’s poetic leanings toward short lines, human interaction with nature, and accessible observation – a combination Snyder himself borrowed from Chinese verse of the Tang Dynasty. Wang thus pays homage to his mentor, Snyder, who in turn had learned from Wang’s ancestral tradition.²³ Snyder also appreciated and sometimes translated Native American oral poetry. Following suit, two of Wang’s translations of Samoan oral poetry are included in the last section of *Asian-American Heritage*. Hence, Wand’s anthology at once casts a wide net and captures some idiosyncratic favorites.

Wand’s choice to include poems by Sadakichi Hartmann also distinguishes his aesthetic and political sensibility from that of the editors of both

Aiiieeee! and the Asian American issue of the *Yardbird Reader*. One haiku, two tanka, and one poem after the French Symbolist tradition by Hartmann appear in *Asian-American Heritage*. The haiku, published originally in the 1890s and surely one of the first written in English, reads “Butterflies a-wing – / Are you flowers returning / To your branch in Spring?”²⁴ In this and other examples, Hartmann – who was born to a Japanese mother and Prussian father and educated in Europe – combined a Japanese metrical pattern with an English rhyme scheme.²⁵ Wand, a professor of comparative literature, must have reveled in such literary crosspollinations. The *Aiiieeee!* editors, however, exclude writers like Hartmann because they seemed to say less about Asian American lived experience when compared with the more documentary prose of writers like Carlos Bulosan.²⁶ Consequently, Chin et al. disparaged Sadakichi Hartmann with the argument that he “momentarily influenced American writing with the quaintness of the Orient but said nothing about Asian America.”²⁷ Subsequent scholars have challenged this view, pointing out playful complexity and possible subversion in works by Hartmann and others.

Chin et al. saw in such writers an existential threat. According to them, early writers like Hartmann and later writers like David Henry Hwang, Amy Tan, and Maxine Hong Kingston did not merely sell books but actually sold out – i.e. they reinforced Orientalist stereotypes for personal gain. In their follow-up volume, *The Big Aiiieeee!: An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature*, which was published in 1991, Jeffery Paul Chan et al. condemn Asian American writers whose aesthetics and politics appeal too easily to mainstream audiences. They take such appeal to be a sign of these writers’ cooptation, their internalization of a self-hatred designed to erase their heritage. In his essay “Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake,” Frank Chin explains that works popular with mainstream audiences adhere “to the specifications of the Christian stereotype of Asia being as opposite morally from the West as it is geographically.”²⁸ This kind of writing, he argues, invites readers to think of Asian Americans as “‘choice souls’ ripe for salvation,” that is, racialized heathens needing conversion to white, Christian ideals.²⁹ According to Chin, acceptance of this version of “fake” success via assimilation necessarily entails the suppression of a “real” heritage found in such Chinese works as Lo Kuan Chung’s *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Shi Na’an’s *The Water Margin (Outlaws of the Marsh)*, Wu Cheng En’s *Journey to the West (Monkey)*, and Sun Tzu’s *Art of War*, as well as Japanese tales like *Momotarō (Peach Boy)* and *Chūshingura (The Loyal Forty-Seven Ronin)*.

“Fake” writers forget or desecrate this tradition. “Real” writers remember and deserve to be included in anthologies.

Visual images, prose selections, dramatic excerpts, and poems by Asian Americans in volume three of *Yardbird Reader* were chosen undoubtedly to reinforce their guest editors’ definition of “real” Asian American sensibility – one dominated by historical realism, familial connections, and political resistance. For instance, photographs capture everyday Chinatown street scenes and family portraits, and drawings by Miné Okubo depict scenes from the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II. Prose selections recount stories of immigration and survival. The lead editor’s own second act from *Chickencoop Chinaman* shares the voice and perspective of Tam Lum, who as child identified with the Lone Ranger, whom he believed wore a mask to conceal his Chinese eyes: “That’s what happens when you’re a Chinaman boy in the kitchen, listenin in the kitchen to the radio, for what’s happenin in the other world, while grandmaw has an ear for nothing but ancient trains in the night, and talks pure Chinamouth you understood only by love and feel.”³⁰ Ben Fee’s poem “The Nan-Chang Five Hundred” celebrates Chinese soldiers as “Dragons of lightning” who fought against the Japanese imperial army in 1939, and Alexander Kuo’s poem quotes Sun Tzu’s *Art of War*.³¹ While these poems harken back to Asian militaristic strength and wisdom, others relate mundane Asian American experiences. Wing Tek Lum’s “Going Home,” for example, describes a common awkwardness among Chinese Americans of his generation:

Ngho m’sick gong tong hua –
besides the usual menu words,
the only phrase I really know.³²

Two of Mei Berssenbrugge’s three poems fall into a similar vein, the first focused on her father’s and grandfather’s migrations and the second about how she “was born in the year of the Loon.”³³ Interestingly, both of these poems play with the tropes they evoke. Berssenbrugge’s grandfather travels to Cambridge, Massachusetts, only to acquire “a taste for apple pie,” winkingly marked as exotic, and of course there is no year of the loon in the Chinese zodiac.³⁴ Her third poem in the volume, however, entirely eludes easy exegesis. “Fish Souls” contains lines like “libation is an ancient word / the burnt odor of goat’s heart in stone / I sacrifice / my hair scattering like fish bones.”³⁵ Hence, as in every anthology, literature itself often bursts out of the boxes that editors create for it. Still, Chin and Wong were glad to take “advantage of this volume of *Yardbird Reader* to print up a little proof from the past” of Asian American presence and expression.³⁶

In the 1991 “Preface to the Mentor Edition” of *Aiiieeeee!*, Chin et al. lament that Asian American scholars who read the 1974 edition of their anthology were not inspired to “venture into libraries and archives to look for Asian American works and papers from old Asian American times.”³⁷ They themselves had done so, forming the Combined Asian American Resources Project (CARP), which reprinted the now classic novels *No-No Boy*, first published in 1957 by John Okada, and *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, first published in 1961 by Louis Chu. In addition, CARP conducted interviews with Asian Americans, the recordings and transcripts of which now reside at the University of California, Berkeley.³⁸ And their *Big Aiiieeeee!* reprinted not only previously published belles lettres by writers like Sui Sin Far (née Edith Eaton) and Toshio Mori but also obscure archival works like *An English-Chinese Phrase Book* by Wong Sam and Cantonese folk rhymes translated by Marlon Hom. The editors appreciated Sui Sin Far because the Chinese American “characters of her stories, like herself, do not fit the Christian missionary and social Darwinist stereotypes.” Their headnote goes on to say that she wrote “from reality instead of prejudice.”³⁹ The fascinating *English-Chinese Phrase Book* does not merely offer bilingual equivalences but through choice phrases teaches “strategy and tactics for business and criminal law . . . for dealing with white people in general.”⁴⁰ Hence, Chan et al. performed uncontestably important acts of recovery and preservation. It is worth noting, too, that their 1991 selection criteria expanded beyond those they followed in 1974. Shawn Wong admits that he and his fellow editors reflected on their omissions in *Aiiieeeee!* and sought to offer correctives in *The Big Aiiieeeee!*.⁴¹ For instance, by including Sui Sin Far, they canonized a mixed-race writer of English and Chinese descent who came to the United States by way of England and Canada. In addition, by including translations of Cantonese folk rhymes, they legitimized non-Anglophone, poetic work. These choices demonstrate that the editors came to prioritize political stance over other variables such as country of birth and language.

However, their “contingencies of value,” as Barbara Herrnstein Smith would call them, prevented the *Aiiieeeee!* editors from recognizing a host of other early Asian American writers as well as some works by writers they admired.⁴² By privileging texts they believed upheld a particular heroic tradition, they were less able to appreciate subtlety, marginality, and other forms of deviation from the norms they valorized. Their boldness, however, made their work both controversial and influential. While Wand’s *Asian-American Heritage* was published the very same year as Chin et al.’s

Aiiieeeee!, it is the latter that set the terms for the development of Asian American literary studies during the 1980s.

Expanding the Asian American Canon

Waves of recovery workers and critics built on the foundation established by Jeffery Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong, oftentimes using their disagreements with and the lacunae of *Aiiieeeee!* and *The Big Aiiieeeee!* as points of departure for their refinements and additions. "People really began to take exception to some of the stances we took," Shawn Wong recalls; "it started a dialogue."⁴³ For instance, because Chin et al. focused on writers of Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino descent, scholars have worked assiduously to add writers of other origins to the canon. *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (1982) by Elaine Kim not only launched the academic field but also added Korean American writers. Bibliographies listing writers of more various ethnic backgrounds also assisted in broadening the scope of Asian American literature. Chief among them was *Asian American Literature: An Annotated Bibliography* (1988) by King-Kok Cheung and Stan Yogi, which included primary sources by not only Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, Filipino Americans, and Korean Americans but also South Asian Americans and Southeast Asian Americans. Later scholarship and anthologies specialized in adding writers from these two latter groups to the canon. Particularly notable contributions in this vein include *A Part, Yet Apart: South Asians in Asian America* (1998), edited by Lavina Dhingra Shankar and Rajini Srikanth, and *Watermark: Vietnamese American Poetry and Prose* (1998), edited by Barbara Tran, Monique T. D. Truong, and Luu Truong Khoi.

Besides focusing only on writers of Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino descent, the *Aiiieeeee!* anthology privileged prose. Hence, some scholars have worked on recovering the underrepresented genres of poetry and drama. Juliana Chang's *Quiet Fire: A Historical Anthology of Asian American Poetry, 1892–1970* (1996) remains the most important collection concentrating on the history of Asian American verse. Walter Lew's *Premonitions: The Kaya Anthology of New Asian North American Poetry* (1995) collects not only more recent poetry but also different kinds of poems than those valued by other editors. Lew's volume includes, for instance, cyberpunk meditations, Buddhist odes, and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poems. *Premonitions* contains work by seventy-three contributors, including some by the now revered poet John Yau. *The Big Aiiieeeee!* editors, however, had dismissed his work

as that of “an uptight East Coast asshole.”⁴⁴ Roberta Uno recovered plays by editing *Unbroken Thread: An Anthology of Plays by Asian American Women* (1993) and establishing the Roberta Uno Asian American Women Playwrights Scripts Collection, held at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, which features manuscripts, production histories, reviews, and articles, along with biographies and interviews with playwrights from as far back as 1924. A partial list of scholars working to frame and understand the significance of earlier Asian American literature in these genres includes Josephine Park and Steven Yao on verse and Josephine Lee and James Moy on drama.⁴⁵

The Big Aiiieeeee! editors also disparaged the genre of autobiography, claiming that most examples by Asian Americans are assimilation narratives and therefore inauthentic representations of Asian American experience. They dismissed work by Pardee Lowe and Jade Snow Wong, both of whom Hsu and Palubinskas included in *Asian-American Authors*, and critiqued autobiographical writers like Yung Wing and Yan Phou Lee, who were not included in any earlier anthologies. According to Frank Chin, all of these writers participate in “the process of conversion from an object of contempt to an object of acceptance. . . . It’s the quality of submission, not assertion that counts” in autobiography. “The fighter writer,” by contrast, “uses literary forms as weapons of war, not the expression of ego alone.”⁴⁶ What Chin fails to acknowledge, however, is that writers can choose to deploy what Viet Thanh Nguyen calls “flexible strategies” in their work.⁴⁷ Scholarly essays collected in *Form and Transformation in Asian American Literature* (2005), edited by Zhou Xiaojing and Samina Najmi, for example, demonstrate how earlier writers such as Onoto Watanna, Yung Wing, and Jade Snow Wong appropriated and, in some cases, subverted autobiographical conventions to accomplish subtle and surprising political and aesthetic ends. In recent years, editors and publishers have begun to reprint some of these early autobiographies.

Feminist critics like King-Kok Cheung, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, and Amy Ling also point out that Chin et al. privileged works that upheld a heteronormative male positionality. “In their attempt to advocate a ‘masculine’ language,” according to Cheung, “the editors of *Aiiieeeee!* valorize such novels as *Eat a Bowl of Tea* and *No-No Boy*, both of which are written in vociferous styles. . . . To counterbalance these editors’ ongoing attempts to reclaim an Asian Heroic Tradition and a ‘manly’ style, I have chosen to give ‘feminine’ poetics its due.”⁴⁸ Consequently, Cheung and her colleagues have produced a body of scholarship focused on the recovery of women writers. Exemplary works include monographs such as *Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry* (1990) by Amy Ling and

Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa (1993) by King-Kok Cheung; and anthologies such as *Making Waves: An Anthology of Writings by and about Asian American Women* (1989) edited by Asian Women United of California and *The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian American Women's Anthology* (1992) edited by Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Mayumi Tsutakawa, and Margarita Donnelly.⁴⁹

Even though Jeffery Paul Chan et al. celebrated woman writer Sui Sin Far in *The Big Aiiieeeee!*, they included only works that best served their political goals. Her 1909 autobiographical essay “Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian” contains some ambiguous moments but mainly features clear scenes of defiance such as when the narrator sacrifices her own financial interests to defend Chinese immigrants in a conversation with her employer.⁵⁰ And the two linked stories that follow this essay in the anthology focus on a white woman who chooses to marry a Chinese American man. Chan et al. stay away, however, from Sui Sin Far’s 1900 story “The Smuggling of Tie Co,” which features a Chinese Canadian woman passing as a man who tells her white male traveling companion, “I not like women, like men.” This queerness would have disrupted the heteronormative masculinity that they so valued.⁵¹ Overall, the *Aiiieeeee!* editors downplay Sui Sin Far’s many complexities in terms of both her multifaceted identity and her elliptical storytelling in favor of reinforcing ideological clarity. The following sentence in their headnote oversimplifies her actual lived experience: “She looked white but chose to live and write as a Chinese American.”⁵² As a corrective, subsequent scholarship by David Shih, Victor Bascara, and others has expanded and deepened our understanding of her work.⁵³ Two scholarly editions also have played key roles in this effort: *Mrs. Spring Fragrance and Other Writings* (1995) edited by Amy Ling and Annette White-Parks and *Becoming Sui Sin Far: Early Fiction, Journalism, and Travel Writing by Edith Maude Eaton* (2016) edited by Mary Chapman.

The *Aiiieeeee!* editors ignored altogether Sui Sin Far’s sister, Winnifred Eaton, who wrote under the name Onoto Watanna. As her Japanese-sounding pseudonym indicates, Watanna chose to identify as Japanese in spite of her actual mixed English and Chinese heritage. During the turn of the century, Japanese were considered much more palatable than Chinese, partly because their numbers were low enough to avoid posing a threat and partly because influential figures like Lafcadio Hearn, Theodore Roosevelt, and others promoted the idea of Japanese culture as quaintly charming and aesthetically pleasing.⁵⁴ Even the employer in Sui Sin Far’s essay admits that “the Japanese are different altogether. There is something bright and

likable about those men.”⁵⁵ Watanna rode this wave of Japanophilia. For instance, her novel *A Japanese Nightingale* (1900) was translated into several languages and adapted for the stage and screen. During her career, Watanna published at least ten more novels and over 100 essays and short stories. Contemporary critics, however, have been slow to acknowledge her. Perhaps we have been reluctant to value a writer who passed for Japanese when she is half-Chinese and who seemed to have prioritized sales over substance. Only further study of her works will tell. Fortunately, Linda Trinh Moser and Elizabeth Rooney have anthologized some of her essays and short works in *“A Half-Caste” and Other Writings* (2003); Eve Oishi has helped to recover her first novel; and Moser has brought her autobiographical *Me: A Book of Remembrance* back into print. Because many of the journals in which Watanna published are not digitized, researcher Jean Lee Cole has had to resort to the “time-honored method of periodical page-turning” to unearth dozens more of her writings.⁵⁶

The case of Onoto Watanna is instructive. How many other Asian American writers have we overlooked or ignored on account of our political biases? Viet Thanh Nguyen has shown critics of Asian American studies that we have largely tended to celebrate “bad” subjects, that is, writers who support our brand of “resistance” – whatever that might be – over “good” subjects, who appear overly compliant or docile, as if our scholarly choices could dispel the model minority myth. Hence, Chan et al. chose purveyors of the “real” over the “fake,” and Amy Ling lifted up the “loud and vocal” over the “silent and demure.”⁵⁷ In light of this trend, Leif Sorensen wonders, “What are we to do with authors to whom we would prefer not to listen?”⁵⁸ His solution is to cultivate a historicized view that refuses binary thinking. Taking Korean American writer Younghill Kang as his example, Sorensen explains that “Understanding Kang’s time in Korea requires the critic to engage simultaneously with both the Kang who critiques the [Japanese imperial] occupation and the Kang who profits from it instead of making either the critical or the complicit Kang into a single author function that can be recovered or excluded.”⁵⁹ To some degree, recovery workers have applied such a capacious mindset to recuperating complex figures like Kathleen Tamagawa, the half-Japanese, half-Irish American who declared “The trouble with me is my ancestry,” as well as H. T. Tsiang, who simultaneously wrote revolutionary proletarian literature and played buck-toothed caricatures in World War II-era films. Even more recent work is being done to recover writers like Lin Yutang, who collaborated with white writers to provide what some present-day critics would consider exotica.⁶⁰ And Stephen Hong Sohn is working on

Asian American novelists who do not feature Asian American protagonists.⁶¹ Yet much remains to be done to consider those earlier writers who do not identify themselves as Asian American and/or do not address topics that register as Asian or Asian American at all. What are we to do with any writings we should discover by Edward Charles Eaton, Sui Sin Far's older brother, who "camouflaged his Chinese heritage and became assimilated into the British-Canadian community"?⁶² Indeed, such figures require careful reading and contextualization. We may not have the occasion to consider them at all, though, if their work has not been recovered, hence the need for publication – traditional or digital.

Getting into Print, Entering the Canon

Working with scholars who specialize in discovering, editing, introducing, and annotating lost or underappreciated texts, university-affiliated publishers have long played an important role in recovery work. While the need to profit motivates most commercial publishers, university presses are primarily driven by the mission to promote scholarship and are normally subsidized by their institutions.⁶³ Hence, the University of Washington Press has been able to reprint *Citizen 13660* by Miné Okubo, who kept a notebook of drawings and commentary on her incarceration as a Japanese American during World War II; Rutgers University Press could reprint *Holy Prayers in a Horse's Ear*, a memoir by a mixed-race author, Kathleen Tamagawa, who came of age in the early twentieth century; and Temple University Press was able to publish *Paper Son: One Man's Story*, a first-person account by Tung Pok Chin, a Chinese American who navigated life in America with false immigration documents from the 1930s into the 1950s. Although sales are always a factor in a capitalistic economy, significance must have been the priority behind these editorial decisions.

More recently, non-university-affiliated publishers such as Kaya Press and Penguin Books have contributed to these recovery efforts. Initially founded as an independent press in New York, Kaya devotes itself to discovering and publishing work by Asian diasporic writers. Led by Sunyoung Lee, Kaya reprinted Korean American author Younghill Kang's 1937 novel *East Goes West*, and now, with more secure funding via the University of Southern California, it has been reprinting all of the novels of H. T. Tsiang, an early-twentieth-century Chinese American leftist writer, as well as translated works such as *Lament in the Night* by Shōson Nagahara, who immigrated to the United States from Japan at the turn of the twentieth century. Under the leadership of Elda Rotor and John

Siciliano, Penguin Classics has decided to redefine and expand the notion of what counts as an American classic, publishing for instance *Doveglion: Collected Poems* by José Garcia Villa, the Filipino American writer who won the American Academy of Arts and Letters Award in 1943.

Does recovery, however, require the costly, time-consuming, and finite production of paperback and hardbound books? It is tempting in the internet age to satisfy ourselves with digital archives. Consider, for instance, Sadakichi Hartmann's *Collected Poems, 1886–1944*, which Little Island Press asked me to edit and produced in a hardbound edition only. While it sells for over twenty dollars, researchers can download scanned copies of almost every book Hartmann published for free as long as they have access to the online database HathiTrust. The 191-page printed edition weighs one-and-a-half pounds, far more than pixels on a screen. Materiality, however, contributes to its gravitas. In "A Sense of Physical Books in Our Digital Society," Stewart Todhunter and Penny de Byl observe that "The ability to touch and smell a book has an innate power engaging readers in a way not yet possible through pure digitised versions of the same media."⁶⁴ Furthermore, the Little Island edition of Hartmann's collected poems gains gravitas from the editorial process itself. I sifted through various extant editions of Hartmann's books (found in person, online, and via interlibrary loan) to adjudicate between different versions of the same poem. Moreover, this edition includes selected unpublished work gleaned from undigitized archives, namely the Sadakichi Hartmann Papers at the University of California, Riverside. Finally, it includes a scholarly discussion of his oeuvre. At every stage of the process, the work benefited from questions posed and suggestions offered by the publisher as well as colleagues and research assistants. The clothbound cover and acid-free paper provide tactile pleasure. All of this adds to the cultural capital of Sadakichi Hartmann as a contender for inclusion in any literary canon – Asian American, American, or Modernist. While digital archives and editions will play an increasingly important role in recovery efforts, printed books still matter.

Canonization may require a different process for works that were never in print in the first place like oral literature, hand-written letters, or corporate documents. Editions like *Chinese American Voices: From the Gold Rush to the Present* (2006), compiled by Judy Yung, Gordon H. Chang, and Him Mark Lai, provide one kind of solution. As with Chan et al.'s inclusion of *An English-Chinese Phrase Book* by Wong Sam, Yung et al. bring into print such nonliterary texts as "Documents of the Chinese Six Companies Pertaining to Immigration" and letters found in

the Kam Wah Chung Company Building in John Day, Oregon. The latter are missives in Chinese written to and by laborers who used the Kam Wah Chung store as a post office during the late nineteenth century. To recover oral reverberations, Terese Guinsatao Monberg has advocated for “rhetorical listening.” Such an approach is necessary, she argues, to preserve unprinted and often invisible work by Filipina activists such as Gabriela Silang, Prosy Abarquez-Delacruz, Carol Ojeda-Kimbrough, Irene Natividad, Dorothy Laigo Cordova, and others. Monberg advocates for listening to and recovering Cordova’s work via the genre of the oral history interview, which enabled her to capture “a mind at work.”⁶⁵ Hence, recovery workers have had to be creative and persistent in order to do justice to their subjects.

A Final Word

Inclusion or exclusion in a literary canon signifies inclusion or exclusion in a culture. Consider, for instance, the Library of America series, which aims “to celebrate the words that have shaped America.” Its editors claim that their series is “the definitive collection of American writing” and promise to “encompass all periods and genres and showcase the vitality and variety of America’s literary legacy.”⁶⁶ Alas, this 281-volume series – which includes predictable selections like three volumes of Walt Whitman’s poetry and prose and slightly more adventurous choices like two volumes of Ursula K. LeGuin’s speculative fiction – includes only three short selections by Asian American writers. Moreover, all three are embedded in volumes devoted to reportage: a selection of drawings by Miné Okubo on the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II, a dispatch from Le Kim Dinh on the war in Vietnam, and an excerpt by Maxine Hong Kingston on peace activism. While these are fine choices, they do not go far in “showcas[ing] the vitality and variety of America’s literary legacy” by Asian Americans. To their credit, other canonical sources are doing better. Recent editions of the Heath and Norton anthologies of American literature include more Asian American authors and a wider range of their work.

Much, however, remains to be done. As we continue our work to recover Asian American literary legacies, we ought to be mindful of the biases – political, personal, and institutional – that prevent us from valuing certain writers or kinds of writing. In addition, we must participate vigorously in scholarly conversations about interpretation and significance. Finally, we

need to remain vigilant against the “danger of redisappearance” that always haunts any recovered author or work.⁶⁷

Notes

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1. Elaine Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings in Their Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 4. See also Floyd Cheung, “Good Asian/Bad Asian: Asian American Racial Formation” in *American Literature in Transition, 1940–1950*, ed. Christopher Vials (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 144–160.
 2. Mira Chieko Shimabukuro, “Relocating Authority: Coauthor(iz)ing a Japanese American Ethos of Resistance under Mass Incarceration,” in *Representations: Doing Asian American Rhetoric*, ed. Mao Luming and Morris Young (Boulder: University of Colorado, 2008), 131.
 3. Thanks to Zayda Delgado for providing access to the Sadakichi Hartmann Papers, Special Collections, University of California, Riverside. The entire untitled poem appears in Sadakichi Hartmann, *Collected Poems, 1886–1944*, ed. Floyd Cheung (Stroud: Little Island Press), 142.
 4. Frank Chin and Shawn Wong, “Introduction,” in *Yardbird Reader*, vol. 3, ed. Frank Chin and Shawn Wong (Berkeley: Yardbird, 1974), vi. The story about Howard University Press’s restriction against poetry comes from a personal communication by Calvin McMillin via Facebook, February 13, 2018.
 5. Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910–1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 11.
 6. David Palumbo-Liu, *The Ethnic Canon: Histories, Institutions, and Interventions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 14.
 7. Another key anthology of this era is *Roots: An Asian American Reader* (1971), edited by Amy Tachiki, Eddie Wong, Franklin Odo, and Buck Wong. It focused, however, not on recovering past literature but on collecting the work of contemporary Asian Americans. See also William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993).
 8. Langston Hughes, quoted in *Forgotten Pages of American Literature*, ed. Gerald Haslam (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), 11.
 9. Haslam, *Forgotten Pages of American Literature*, 1.

10. *Ibid.*, 11.
11. *Ibid.*, 79.
12. *Ibid.*, 85.
13. José Garcia Villa, "Be Beautiful, Noble, Like the Antique Ant," in *Forgotten Pages of American Literature*, ed. Gerald Haslam (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), 143.
14. Kai-yu Hsu and Helen Palubinskas, eds., *Asian-American Authors* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), 1.
15. *Ibid.*, 1, 6.
16. *Ibid.*, 112.
17. For further analysis, see Donald Goellnicht, "Inventing Identity: The Manifestos of Pioneering Asian American Literature Anthologies," in *Cambridge History of Asian American Literature*, ed. Rajini Srikanth and Min Hyoung Song (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 254–270.
18. David Hsin-fu Wand, ed., *Asian-American Heritage: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1974), 2.
19. Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong, "Preface to the First Edition," in *Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Asian American Writers* (New York: Mentor, 1991), xi.
20. Maxine Hong Kingston, "Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers," in *Asian and Western Writers in Dialogue: New Cultural Identities*, ed. Guy Amirthanayagam (London: Macmillan, 1982), 60.
21. King-Kok Cheung, *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 8.
22. David Rafael Wang, "Quartet for Gary Snyder," in *Asian-American Heritage: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry*, ed. David Hsin-fu Wand (New York: Washington Square Press, 1974), 174.
23. For more on Wand/Wang, see Josephine Nock-Hee Park, *Apparitions of Asia: Modernist Form and Asian American Poetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 91–95.
24. Sadakichi Hartmann, "Butterflies a-wing," in *Asian-American Heritage: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry*, ed. David Hsin-fu Wand (New York: Washington Square Press, 1974), 143.
25. Hartmann claimed to have originated this combination.
26. For a more extensive discussion about the field's evolving valuation of poetry, see Warren Liu's chapter in this volume.
27. Chin, Chan, Inada, and Wong, "Preface to the First Edition," in *Aiiieeeee!*, xxi.
28. Frank Chin, "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake," in *The Big Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature*, ed. Jeffery Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong (New York: Meridian, 1991), 8.
29. *Ibid.*, 10.
30. Frank Chin, *Chickencoop Chinaman*, in *Yardbird Reader*, vol. 3, ed. Frank Chin and Shawn Wong (Berkeley: Yardbird, 1974), 260.

31. Ben Fee, "The Nan-Chang Five Hundred," in *Yardbird Reader*, vol. 3, ed. Frank Chin and Shawn Wong (Berkeley: Yardbird, 1974), 47.
32. Wing Tek Lum, "Going Home," in *Yardbird Reader*, vol. 3, ed. Frank Chin and Shawn Wong (Berkeley: Yardbird, 1974), 239. The phrase means "I don't know how to speak Chinese" and functions like "No hablo español."
33. Mei Berssenbrugge, "Chronicle," in *Yardbird Reader*, vol. 3, ed. Frank Chin and Shawn Wong (Berkeley: Yardbird, 1974), 49.
34. Mei Berssenbrugge, "Chronicles: Number One and Two," in *Yardbird Reader*, vol. 3, ed. Frank Chin and Shawn Wong (Berkeley: Yardbird, 1974), 49.
35. Mei Berssenbrugge, "Fish Souls," in *Yardbird Reader*, vol. 3, ed. Frank Chin and Shawn Wong (Berkeley: Yardbird, 1974), 51.
36. Frank Chin, "Yardbird Publishing," in *Yardbird Reader*, vol. 3, ed. Frank Chin and Shawn Wong (Berkeley: Yardbird, 1974), v.
37. Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong, "Aiiieeeee! Revisited: Preface to the Mentor Edition," in *Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Asian American Writers*, ed. Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Hsu Wong. (New York: Mentor, 1991), xxiv.
38. Combined Asian American Resources Project, *Asian American Oral History Composite: San Francisco*, mss 78/123 c Box 1, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
39. Jeffery Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong, eds., *The Big Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature* (New York: Meridan, 1991), 111.
40. *Ibid.*, 93.
41. Jeffrey F. L. Partridge, "Aiiieeeee! and the Asian American Literary Movement: A Conversation with Shawn Wong," *MELUS* 29, nos. 3–4 (Fall–Winter 2004), 91–102.
42. Barbara Herrnstein Smith, "Contingencies of Value," *Critical Inquiry*, 1 (1983), 1–35.
43. Partridge, "Aiiieeeee! and the Asian American Literary Movement," 95.
44. John Yau, personal communication via Facebook, February 13, 2018.
45. See Josephine Nock-Hee Park, *Apparitions of Asia: Modernist Form and Asian American Poetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Steven Yao, *Foreign Accents: Chinese American Verse from Exclusion to Postethnicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Josephine Lee, *Performing Asian America: Race and Ethnicity on the Contemporary Stage* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997); and James Moy, *Marginal Sights: Staging the Chinese in America* (Iowa City: University of Iowa, 1993).
46. Frank Chin, "This Is Not an Autobiography," *Genre* 18, no. 2 (1985), 112.
47. Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 4.
48. King-Kok Cheung, *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 8–9.

49. Goellnicht points out, however, that “Asian American feminist anthologies can be traced back to *Asian Women* (Berkeley: University of California, Berkeley, 1971), a journal published at Berkeley. It did not circulate widely.”
50. Sui Sin Far, “Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian,” in *The Big Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature*, ed. Jeffery Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong (New York: Meridian, 1991), 118.
51. In their introduction to *The Big Aiiieeeee!*, they complain that Hwang’s representation of a Chinese opera singer who passes as a woman to seduce a French diplomat reinforces longstanding stereotypes of “effeminate closet queens like Charlie Chan and . . . homosexual menaces like Fu Manchu.” Their *ad hominem* attack concludes thus: “The good Chinese man, at his best, is the fulfillment of white male homosexual fantasy, literally kissing white ass. Now Hwang and the stereotype are inextricably one” (xiii).
52. *Ibid.*, 111.
53. See David Shih, “The Seduction of Origins: Sui Sin Far and the Race for Tradition,” in *Form and Transformation in Asian American Literature*, ed. Zhou Xiaojing and Samina Najmi (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), 48–76; and Victor Bascara, *Model-Minority Imperialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), ch. 3.
54. Christopher Benfey, *The Great Wave: Gilded Age Misfits, Japanese Eccentrics, and the Opening of Old Japan* (New York: Penguin, 2003).
55. Sui Sin Far, “Leaves,” 117.
56. Jean Lee Cole, “Newly Recovered Works by Onoto Watanna (Winnifred Eaton): A Prospectus and Checklist,” *Legacy* 2 (2004), 229.
57. Amy Ling, *Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1990), 17.
58. Leif Sorensen, *Ethnic Modernism and the Making of US Literary Multiculturalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 223.
59. *Ibid.*, 225.
60. Richard Jean So, “Collaboration and Translation: Lin Yutang and the Archive of Asian American Literature,” *Modern Fiction Studies*, 1 (2010), 40–62.
61. Stephen Hong Sohn, *Racial Asymmetries: Asian American Fictional Worlds* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).
62. Annette White Parks, *Sui Sin Far/Edith Maude Eaton: A Literary Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 156.
63. Cecile M. Jagodzinski, “The University Press in North America: A Brief History,” *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* 40, no. 1 (2008), 1–20.
64. Stewart Todhunter and Penny de Byl, “A Sense of Physical Books in Our Digital Society,” in *Refereed Proceedings of the Australian and New Zealand Communication Association Conference: Rethinking Communication, Space and Identity* (Queenstown: The Australian and New Zealand Communication Association (ANZCA), 2015), 1–11. See also Jean Lee Cole, “A New Digital Divide: Recovery Editing in the Age of Digitization,” *Legacy* 33, no. 1 (2016), 153.

65. Terese Guinsatao Monberg, "Listening for Legacies; or, How I Began to Hear Dorothy Laigo Cordova, the Pinay behind the Podium Known as FANHS91," in *Representations: Doing Asian American Rhetoric*, ed. Mao Luming and Morris Young (Boulder: University of Colorado, 2008), 91.
66. Library of America, www.loa.org/about.
67. Karen L. Kilcup, "Embodied Pedagogies: Femininity, Diversity, and Community in Anthologies of Women's Writing, 1836–2009," *Legacy* 26, no. 2 (2009), 319.