Incorporations of Chineseness

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Hybridity, Bodies, and Chinese American Literature

By

Serena Fusco

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A NOTE ON ROMANIZATION

The *pinyin* system has been used throughout this work for romanizing Chinese terms and names. Exceptions to the usage of *pinyin* in this book are: transposition/quotations from texts that use other romanization systems; transcriptions of first names and surnames (especially of writers and scholars) that already circulate or mostly circulate in other romanization styles.

Chinese names consist of a surname, usually (albeit not necessarily) monosyllabic, followed by a first name. In some cases this order is inverted, especially when a Western audience is addressed, so that the first name precedes the surname. This book follows the Chinese usage, except in the cases of writers and scholars who prefer to adopt the inversion of their own names and/or in their own writing.

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This book is a thorough re-elaboration, involving many additions and subtractions, of the doctoral thesis that I wrote while enrolled in the Comparative Literature PhD program at Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale". The book has been long in the making, because the project has followed a very tortuous track, made of unexpected turns, several interruptions, and as many resumptions. The original body of work has been both expanded and substantially revised in order to take into account the developments and transformations that inevitably occurred, over time, in the pertinent field(s). Chapters IV and V are substantially revised and expanded versions of two previously published essays: "Community, Loyalty, Betrayal: Chuang Hua's *Crossings*", in *Letterature d'America. Trimestrale dell'Università degli Studi di Roma "La Sapienza"* (Roma: Bulzoni, XXXII.139 (2012): 5-35) and "'Call Me an Innocent Criminal': Dual Discourse, Gender, and 'Chinese' America in Nie Hualing's *Sangqing yu Taohong/Mulberry and Peach*", in *JTAS: Journal of Transnational American Studies* 4.1 (2012), Special Forum on "Redefining the American in Asian American Studies: Transnationalism, Diaspora, and Representation", guest edited by Daniel Y. Kim, Elisabetta Marino, and Tanfer Emin Tunc. Both are reproduced with permission.

Many years ago, when I started attending her classes in British and American literature at Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale", Donatella Izzo introduced me to the wonders of a critical, politically conscious approach to literature. This was the seed of my eventual desire to become a literary scholar. Donatella was my tutor when I was a doctoral student, and has been an unshakable and indispensable presence in my work for a long time now. I wish to express my deepest gratitude to her, for the invaluable and ever-present intellectual and human support that she has provided, as well as for continuing to believe in this project.

My interest in Asian American literature arose during my undergraduate years. As a major in Comparative Studies, with a double track in English and Chinese and an interest in U.S. culture, the discovery of such a field of creativity and inquiry perfectly responded to my desire to explore a common ground, a third space, between the areas that I worked in. A more specific focus on Chinese American literature and its possible ramifications followed, as an almost natural development, a few years later.

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Serena Fusco
Naples, August 2015

INTRODUCTION

THE STAKES

In 1992, Vietnamese American scholar Yen Le Espiritu published a study that would become influential in the theorization and historical reconstruction of "Asian American panethnicity". In her own terms:

> Pan-Asian American ethnicity is the development of bridging organizations and solidarities among several ethnic and immigrant groups of Asian ancestry [in the United States]. Although subject to the same general prejudice and similar discriminatory laws, Asians in the United States have rarely conceived of themselves as a single people and many still do not. "Asiatic", "Oriental", and "Mongolian" were merely convenient labels used by outsiders to refer to all Asians. The development of panethnicity among Asian Americans has a short history. While examples of white oppression of Asian Americans stretch back over a century, a meaningful pan-Asian movement was not constructed until the late 1960s […]. The emphasis here is on the *political* nature of panethnicity, that is, on the distribution and exercise of, and the struggle for, power and resources inside and outside the community. (Espiritu 14; emphasis in the original)

Espiritu's book expounds on the origins and implications of the *Asian American identity* category, which is based not so much on a single ethnicity, but instead on a shared *panethnic* group response. This response is grounded in resistance and opposition to the racism that, in the U.S., tended for a long time to lump all people of Asian ancestry, American-born or not, under labels such as "Oriental".

In the U.S., *Asian American identity* as conceived nowadays started being recognized, named, and theorized in the context of the community activism and rising ethnic consciousness of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Originating in the vindication of African Americans in the segregated South, the Civil Rights Movement grew, expanded, and over time coalesced around a number of issues. These issues were domestic but also, inevitably, international: among them were the opposition to the Vietnam War and Cold War-driven U.S. imperialism, the struggle for women's rights, gay and lesbian political activism,[1] and the emergence and demand

for equality on the part of a number of marginalized ethnic groups. While acting within the U.S., the activist groups, especially the most radical ones, often had political commitments not only at a domestic U.S. level but also at a transnational one. For instance, African American political vindications had been drawn into the orbit of pan-Africanism from their very inception (see Gilroy); from his U.S. location, W.E.B. Du Bois had theorized, in the early twentieth century, the "color line" as a global issue. Malcolm X's Islam-inflected pan-Africanism, it may be argued, also evolved from a radical discourse that was inevitably declined in transnational, not solely U.S.-based, terms.

Asian American activism present in colleges and universities—mainly on the West Coast and especially in California, where Asian ethnic presence was more conspicuous—also connected the struggle against racial discrimination in the American context to broader struggles, beyond U.S. borders. Asian American historian William Wei has reconstructed a number of these connections: for instance, in 1970, the Asian American Student Alliance at UCLA organized a general strike on campus to oppose the U.S. military invasion of Cambodia. Among others, Wei notes the important role assumed by the newspaper *Gidra*, based in Los Angeles, which voiced the opposition of the Asian American movement to the Vietnam War and more generally to the U.S. policy of military interference in Southeast Asia, occurring under the pretext of containing the communist "Red Threat". The editors of *Gidra* historicized their present moment from a politically conscious, outspoken position:

> [Editorialist] Pat Sumi argued that the atrocity committed at My Lai was not simply an unfortunate accident of the war but had precedents as early as the Philippine-American War (1898-1902) […]. But the most often cited example of this pattern of killing Asians was the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. While the atomic bombs and the mass internment of 120,000 Japanese Americans in concentration camps during World War II were rationalized as "military necessities", according to *Gidra* they were really the result of racial prejudice. (Wei 109)

The Civil Rights Movement, and the Asian American component of it, was to no small degree a student-fueled movement: rooted and disseminated on campuses, it was also a movement about education and culture as political matters. An important component of the struggles of the 1960s, in the U.S. and in Europe, consisted in questioning the Western and racial bias of the academic establishment. Again on the U.S. West Coast, in the San Francisco Bay Area, politically engaged student groups such as the Afro-American Studies Union, the Mexican-American Student Confederation, and the Asian American Political Alliance united in 1969

to form the Third World Liberation Front. Third World group actions, strikes and demonstrations brought about the founding of the institution of the Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of California at Berkeley in 1969. The first programs in Asian American Studies were established at UC Berkeley and San Francisco State University (at that time named San Francisco State College) in the same year.

In a 1991 essay that provides an innovative and insightful historical reconstruction of the roots of Asian American Studies, Sucheta Mazumdar argues that "[f]or many […] of the Asian American activists involved in the Third World student strikes in San Francisco and elsewhere, the international dimensions of what they were involved with were amply clear" (Mazumdar 39). The historical event of 1968 brought different parts of the world into contact like never before. Struggles in different contexts shared a fundamental opposition to the escalation of a system of violence that was controlled by two rival superpowers:

> 1968 […] marked the crest of a worldwide struggle against racism, against capitalism, against bureaucratic socialism, struggles which exploded with the escalation of the Vietnam War. Not only in San Francisco and Chicago and New York, but from London to Paris, from Prague to Berlin, from Warsaw to Rome, from Mexico City to Calcutta to Tokyo, students everywhere confronted governments and university administrators, and struggled for social reform. (Mazumdar 39)

The students' role in this worldwide struggle, and the related focus on educational and academic policies, was, Mazumdar continues, brought about by the unprecedented access to higher education obtained by members of social strata that had previously been excluded from it:

> It was no accident that everywhere these protests were led by students. […] Compared to the pre-war period, the number of students in universities […] had tripled in France, doubled in West Germany, increased by sixty percent in Britain and fifty percent in Italy, and more than doubled in the United States […]. These students were no longer children from privileged ruling-class backgrounds. They came from lower middle-class and working-class families. Many experienced intense alienation and intellectual turmoil as they were confronted with the sterile contents of a liberal arts curricula that followed pre-war models of education and had been designed as an entry into ruling positions for privileged males […].
>
> Asian American Studies was very much a part of this movement for revision of curricula and a broader demand for educational reform. […] So the very genesis of Asian American Studies was international. (Mazumdar 39-40)

Despite such evident internationalism, "discussions of the origins of the Asian American Studies movement", Mazumdar lamented in 1991, "have tended to focus only on the domestic context of the student protests and the establishment of Asian American Studies" (39). Two decades after Mazumdar, building on Penny M. Von Eschen and Cynthia A. Young's work, Jodi Kim highlights the historically grounded quality of both scenarios. On the one hand, Kim notes that, in most cases, an exclusionary Cold War logic effectively served, during the 1950s, to block many connections between the African American struggle for civil rights in the U.S. and the anticolonialist struggles in Africa; on the other hand, she points out that the work of U.S. leftist activists was explicitly inspired both by the domestic tradition and by the concurrent decolonization movements around the world.[2]

Arguments such as Mazumdar's and Kim's help to retrace the tension between the identifications and political commitments, both international and domestic, which have accompanied the very emergence of the "Asian American" signifier.[3] Within this "doubled" context, firmly rooted in the U.S. but with a broad international component and potential, the idea of Asian American identity came into being. Originally, the "Asian American" word compound was created as an alternative to the adjective/noun "Oriental", which was prevalent (and present in official census practices) in defining Asians of various ethnicities in the U.S. As maintained by Espiritu, the term "Asian American" is an appropriation and counter-use of the very logic that lumps all Asians together in one big indistinct identity. In the realm of literature, the beginning of Asian America as a recognizable field of production and criticism is marked by the 1974 publication of the seminal *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*, a collection accompanied by a critical preface, edited by Frank Chin, Jeffery Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong. The event of the publication of *Aiiieeeee!* and its consequences for the Asian American literary field will be discussed presently.

When *Aiiieeeee!* was published, the Chinese American group, together with the Japanese and the Filipino, constituted the most substantial and influential presence among Asians in America. Chinese Americans have always constituted a large, sizeable component of the Asian American panethnic community—both materially and conceptually, both in numbers and in popular perception. The Chinese initially arrived in numbers on the West Coast, especially California, in the mid-nineteenth century to work in mining. They subsequently played an important part, later vindicated and recognized, in building the Transcontinental Railroad. While immigration

from China was severely curtailed during the Exclusion Era (1882-1943), it resumed afterwards and changed shape after 1949 and in the Cold War context, with ROC-U.S. relations playing an important part and only later superseded by the reestablished and privileged PRC-U.S. connections. In other words, Chinese ethnic migration is possibly the most ancient and substantial Asian migration to the U.S.: over time, it assumed different shapes; it was interrupted and resumed, variously encouraged and discouraged. It should be clear, however, that while "Chinese America" was possibly the most conspicuous and historically established component of "Asian America", "Chinese American" as a cultural label acquired force within the encompassing idea of an "Asian American" cultural and ethnic—or, better, panethnic—coalition. In the literary realm, the term "Chinese American literature"—originally written in the now rarely used hyphenated form "Chinese-American literature"—began to make sense, becoming a recognizable object of discourse, under the umbrella-concept "Asian American literature"—or, in its originally hyphenated spelling, "Asian-American literature". The two literary concepts—the "micro" and the "macro", the ethnic and the panethnic—emerged in the same historical period and were articulated in relation to one another. Within the larger corpus of "Asian American literature", Chinese American texts have constantly formed a good percentage of the ever-expanding Asian American literary canon—once again, since the category "Asian American literature" began to make sense and started to be articulated.

Accordingly, there seems to be little reason for rewriting a history of Chinese American literature as substantially separated from the larger history of Asian American literature. Perhaps more than other U.S. ethnic literatures—but this holds true, one might argue, for literary and textual canons in general—Asian American literature cannot be separated from its self-conscious re-creation as a coalition project,[4] a project that inextricably connects literature to politics. The Asian American literature coalition project within Asian American Studies has always been aimed at recognizing and permitting Asian American participation in the cultural (and political) life of the U.S., an act of emancipation breaking with a history of discrimination and exclusion. This emancipation has been attained by means of an excavation and recuperation of long-forgotten literary contributions, and, simultaneously, by making space for the production and publication of new works by Asian American authors. Chinese American literature as a recognizable field came to life at the same historical moment as the larger ensemble of Asian American literature—of which it constitutes a conspicuous, even founding component. In other words, isolating the history of concepts such as

"Chinese American identity" and "Chinese American culture" from the pan-Asian American agenda would be tantamount to an erasure of the sociopolitical history (the historical reasons behind the solidarity among different groups of Asians in the U.S., as well as its international/ist dimension) that accompanied the emergence of Asian America, and of Chinese America *within* it. Taking this fundamental historical dimension into account, the present study does *not* advocate extrapolating Chinese American literature from the broader field of Asian American literature. On the contrary, it attempts to re-frame Chinese American literature within Asian American discourse, taking different components into account.

What seems to make sense, accordingly, is to regard the Asian American "quasi-geographical" cultural coalition from a liminal and transnational perspective, so as to "de-center" it, if at all possible, without undermining its historical and political value. While the emphasis on diversity within the Asian American community and Asian American discourse emerged during the 1990s and increased—or better, took different forms—in the new millennium, the phrase "Asian American" has, arguably, *always* constituted a highly unstable and controversial marker of identity.[5] This instability is reflected in its multiple and historically changing theoretical, cultural, academic, and literary usages. De-centering Asian America is, simply, to pay good attention to all that Lisa Lowe has named "Asian American differences": namely, the plural and stratified nature of the coalition—all the inevitable centrifugal forces that undermine and simultaneously underline the very existence of Asian America as a cultural and political project. Throughout the book, I shall contend that these centrifugal forces are not only inevitable in their existence, but are also culturally significant to the point of being productive for circumscribing Asian America as a cultural and political project. This implies the need to pay attention to the specific value and weight of the different components that come together in this "quasi-geographical" space.

In the present study, I attempt to reach this "differential" theoretical objective through a focus on the pull that is exercised, often across distance, by another weighty cultural and literary "center": China—or, more precisely, *"Chineseness" as a transnational cultural category*. This focus should not be envisioned as an end or an aim *per se*. Quite the opposite, it is intended to set out an analysis of new historical and geopolitical dimensions of the Asian American literary and cultural experience. While acknowledging the ever-impending risk of oversimplifying the crucial importance of cultural and political solidarity among Asians of various ancestries on American soil, I choose to focus on "Chinese America", in order to trace the (real and imaginary) movement

back to where it started—which, I believe, might offer another layer of historical as well as *political* perspective to Asian American Studies overall.[6]

At the same time, a focus on the unique dynamics that characterize the cultural translation of "Chineseness" *in America* might also work in a complementary direction, contributing to shed a specific, "local" light onto the global politics of the Chinese diaspora and Chinese identity as a transnational construct. The cultural discourse of "global Chineseness", related to a putative centrality of Chinese culture and identity in the construction of a futural "Pacific" economy, a discourse that has become increasingly conspicuous in the course of the past thirty-five years, has served a complex of different interests on both Pacific shores, and has been, among other things, variously articulated as hybridity in the broad context of U.S.-China relations. We should also keep in mind that, as argued by David Palumbo-Liu (*Asian/American*), the articulation of hybridity in U.S.-China relations has a history that dates further back in time. This history involves various representations of negative—but also positive—miscegenation on both sides of the Pacific. The Cold War historical split has also inevitably informed the representation of hybridity.

The discourse that I have just labeled "global Chineseness" has a powerful cultural and literary counterpart. In particular, I am referring to a steadily growing body of studies on a corpus that in English is traditionally called "overseas Chinese literature" (*huayi wenxue, haiwai huawen wenxue, haiwai huaren wenxue*) as well as to a growing number of conferences on the cultures and manifestations of the Chinese diaspora. This literary field, which began to stir substantial interest in the Chinese intellectual world during the 1970s and 1980s, has nowadays also entered a global era; almost simultaneously, Comparative Literature scholars have recuperated and rearticulated the idea of world literature, which in the West is usually ascribed to Goethe in its "original" formulation. An increasingly popular concept is "world Chinese literature" (*shijie huawen wenxue, shijie huaren wenxue*) which is counterbalanced by the critical idea known in Anglophone contexts as "the Sinophone" (a term corresponding to *huayu yuxi wenxue* in Chinese)[7]. In the course of this work, I shall discuss some details and implications of the discourse on global Chineseness, mainly from a literary perspective.

With relation to a problematic but nonetheless nowadays recognizable globalization of the very idea of China, a theoretical problem emerges as to what makes Chinese American literature *a substantial part of Asian American literature* and, conversely, to what extent and how this literary and cultural production can be regarded as an expression of fundamental—

albeit extraterritorial—*continuities with Chinese culture*. This is an especially controversial matter, because it draws several "non-innocent" issues into the bigger picture. What are the implications of selecting a number of texts and reuniting them under the label "Chinese American literature"? How does one reconcile the panethnic idea of Asian American literature with a focus on more specific—or, at another level, more *encompassing*—forms of identifications, such as the ones revolving around "diasporic China"? How does one envision the problematic suture between, on the one hand, a repeated investment in the Asian American panethnic network of relations and, on the other hand, the undeniable existence of cultural forces—both older and more recent than the historical period that saw the emergence of Asian American identity—that have among their effects the articulation of a parallel rhetoric of ethnic identity, based on "being Chinese"? What if this parallel rhetoric is revealed to be crucial and productive for the very construction of Asian America?

To sum up: on the one hand, the possibility of a conceptual (and disciplinary) overlap as the one I have sketched above is predicated on a reflection on the very nature of the Asian American literary project and the role of Chinese America within this frame. On the other hand, this overlap illuminates the broad and controversial politics concerning the construction of Chinese identity in our age of globalization. A related matter also emerges, i.e. one about cultural authority: there are high stakes revolving nowadays around "Chineseness" and the possibility of wielding it authoritatively—in other words, to establish what is Chinese, what is un-Chinese, or how "Chineseness" should be, or not be, expressed.[8] In the course of the first chapter, I shall discuss some of the reasons why the construction of "Chineseness" appears to be of an inescapably transnational nature.[9]

It is at this "non-innocent" juncture, I maintain, that a momentarily isolated and strategically reframed "Chinese American literature"—*namely, Asian American literature, both in English and Chinese, that deals with some version of "China" in its confrontation with America, and that is more often than not produced by Chinese American authors, with a growing visibility of women (and, to a lesser extent, queer) authors throughout the years*—becomes a contested field, but perhaps also a field for productive encounters. Investigating a selection of representative texts from this provisional literary space at a transitional historical time may have a twofold potential. On the one hand, it can counter a number of existing, extremely centralized visions regarding what is or should be "Chinese"—tendencies that often lurk, as will be detailed later on, behind the topical discourse of "global Chineseness". On the other hand, it may

contribute to the historicizing (thus fostering serious critical and theoretical engagement) of another problematic tendency, lamented by Susan Koshy during the crucial (for Asian American Studies) 1990s decade. Koshy's essay, "The Fiction of Asian American Literature" (1996), has come to be highly influential and repeatedly quoted; I find at this point that it is useful to turn to it. Koshy is an advocate of the "transnational turn" of Asian American Studies during the 1990s. However, she laments a tendency to *uncritically* enlarge the field defined by the very categories of "Asian American literature", from its early "cultural nationalist" formulations (epitomized by the *Aiiieeeee!* anthology and the critical stance of its editors) to its expansion well beyond the original programmatic borders. Koshy criticizes those acts of expanding the field that, while celebrating the broadened scope of Asian American discourse, refrain from interrogating the conditions of its existence, purporting a de facto expansion based on an uncritical liberal/pluralist ideology and a faith in the ultimately self-adjusting and redeeming powers of multiculturalism. Koshy also underscores the teleological undercurrents of what she regards as the most conservative manifestations of Asian American discourse: she observes that Asian America becomes a narrative of increasing inclusion that projects its "perfect state" in an always deferred *future*.[10] To counter this tendency, she proposes the use of the idea of "Asian America" and its politicized rubric while at the same time remaining aware of the "catachresis status" of the formation. This is tantamount to maintaining that there is no such thing as a "real" Asian American identity: "there is no literal referent for the rubric 'Asian American', and, as such, the name is marked by the limits of its signifying powers" (Koshy, "Fiction" 342). If there is no recognizable referent for "Asian American" as linguistic/cultural sign, there is no ultimate revelatory truth to which it can aspire. Koshy's objective is to claim that in de-essentializing identity lies the potential for political mobilization and political usage: "Asian American Studies is uniquely positioned to intervene in current theoretical discussions on ethnicity, representation and writing not despite of, but because of, the contested and contestatory nature of its formation" (ibid.).[11]

In 2002, Viet Thanh Nguyen published an articulated reflection on the field of Asian American Studies, with special reference to Asian American literary studies, which have for a long time constituted the most consistent portion of the field. Nguyen discusses and criticizes the field's self-presentation as an intrinsically antagonistic (i.e. contestatory) discourse; in the last part of his study, he questions the very viability of the category "Asian America" for advancing social justice through cultural awareness,

because times have changed. In Nguyen's view, the Asian American "body politic", in its growing diversification, increasingly appears as a site of interethnic and interclass conflict, instead of a site of interethnic solidarity (à la Espiritu). At the dawn of the new millennium, not only have the non-aligned interests of the different ethnic groups making up the Asian American coalition emerged; more radically, confronted with this transformed situation, Nguyen suggests that the very category may have lent itself to interests that are at odds with the advancement of the social justice promoted by committed intellectuals: "many Asian Americans may see themselves as equal participants and beneficiaries in a global capitalism that many Asian American intellectuals view with despair. […] [T]he ironic prospect [is] that there can still be a relatively unified Asian America that will operate under a different set of signs from antiracism and anticapitalism" (Nguyen 168).

Nguyen's critique has made a difference in the field of Asian American Studies because it has problematized the prevalent, and in many ways entrenched, modalities of Asian American literary criticism, and highlighted the possibility of collusion—instead of antagonism—between Asian American discourse and neoliberal capitalism. Nevertheless, more than ten years after the publication of Nguyen's book, the category is no more self-explanatory than it was when it was coined and came into use; but it is still there, and cultural criticism is still implemented in its name. The very existence of the category "Asian American", with all its intrinsic contradictions and conflicts, is a historical occurrence, and I contend that a historically grounded critical investigation of some specific aspects of this history can foster awareness and thus contribute to overcoming some of the impasses that Nguyen highlights. Distancing and refocusing can be useful for excavating some contradictions *that have always been there*—of which the *incorporation of China*, I maintain, is part and parcel.

Now that almost two decades have passed since the publication of Koshy's essays, we may chime in, adding that Asian American literature, and critical discussions of Asian American literature, have "gone global" in the sense of both having enlarged their geocultural scope (J. Kim, *Ends of Empire*; Walter S.H. Lim, *Narratives of Diaspora*) and having questioned the color line and the ethnic presuppositions of the field (Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise*, which intensifies Koshy's claim that the Asian American sign has no literal referent; Stephen Hong Sohn, *Racial Asymmetries*). My work, like several others that chronologically follow what Christopher Lee has called the "post-identity turn" in Asian American cultural criticism, is declaredly anti-teleological, while recuperating the potential to interact across different fields and create dialogues. In particular, my study falls

into the group of those that attempt to foster communication between Asian American Studies, Comparative Literature, and Asian Studies. As I will discuss in detail later on, the specific aim of this book is to single out some of the strategies through which Chineseness, understood as/operating as transnationally constructed cultural capital, has developed a founding relation to Asian America. In *The Cultural Capital of Asian American Studies* (2009), Mark Chiang maintains that Asian American discourse—or better, as he uses a Bourdieusian terminology, the Asian American *field*—accumulated (through activism) a political capital that was converted into cultural capital (which in turn began to have an existence of its own) when Asian American Studies became more and more institutionalized in academia, increasingly in the form of literary studies. As I hope to demonstrate by means of a combination of historical reconstruction, disciplinary contextualization, and close readings of my textual selection, the cultural capital of Chineseness was converted into Asian American cultural capital during the period lasting from the peak of the Cold War to the early articulations of Asian American cultural nationalism, and it was reinvested in massive doses twenty to forty years later. It is my contention that the investment of the cultural capital of Chineseness is foundational to the Asian American construct as well as one of its founding instabilities. I would also emphasize that in the light of the current investment in Chineseness on a global scale, retracing some possible articulations of the transnational investment in and of Chineseness at previous, albeit not so distant, moments may illuminate some among the most recent stakes of this process.

Gender and its intrinsic social and cultural value constitute the other major dimension of this study. In this respect, my discourse is situated at the intersection of two heterogeneous phenomena, and I attempt to take both into account. On the one hand, between the late 1980s and the 1990s, Asian American literature made its presence conspicuous and visible in the U.S. literary market—to a lesser extent in the international literary market—with an unprecedented number of books and measure of success. Chinese American novels such as Gish Jen's *Typical American* (1991) and Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* (1993), David Henry Hwang's award-winning play *M. Butterfly* (1988) and Russell Leong's landmark poetry collection *The Country of Dreams and Dust* (1993); Filipina American Jessica Hagedorn's novel *Dogeaters* (1990) and the literary collection *Charlie Chan is Dead* (1993) also edited by Hagedorn; South Asian American short story collections *Junglee Girl* (1995) by Ginu Kamani and *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) by Jhumpa Lahiri, and Chitra Banerjee

Divakaruni's novel *The Mistress of Spices* (1997); Korean American Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* (1995) and *A Gesture Life* (1999), Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman* (1997); Japanese American Ruth L. Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* (1998), Karen Tei Yamashita's (partly set in Brazil) and Lois-Ann Yamanaka's (set in Hawaii) novels—all of these are part of a flourish in publishing that has put Asian American literature increasingly in contact with a mixed, and also mainstream, reading public.[12] Significantly, most of this publishing success revolves around female figures; to a lesser extent, it includes queer authors and queer themes.

The Amy Tan case is in many ways emblematic of this juncture. A Chinese American born in Oakland, California, Tan became a literary sensation in 1989 with the publication of *The Joy Luck Club*, arguably the first Asian American novel to become not only a commercial success but a real publishing phenomenon. *The Joy Luck Club* was followed by two more novels, also acclaimed by the reading public—albeit to a lesser extent by critics: *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991) and *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995). *The Joy Luck Club* was also adapted into a film by Chinese American director Wayne Wang in 1993. Tan, playwright David Henry Hwang, and Maxine Hong Kingston are the authors Frank Chin explicitly takes issue with in an essay included in the anthology *The Big Aiiieeeee!* (1991). Taking up the issue of authenticity (which, as I shall have the occasion to discuss later on, is a fundamental and problematic core in the self-conscious formation of Asian American discourse), Chin attacks these writers because, in his view, they distort Asian (and particularly Chinese) literary and cultural sources in order to achieve profit—a profit strictly dependent on making books entertaining, pleasurable, and marketable to mainstream (i.e. white) readers, who derive their pleasure from a systematic misunderstanding, stereotyping, and "Orientalizing" of Asian cultures: "Kingston, Hwang, and Tan are […] certainly the first writers of Asian ancestry […] to so boldly *fake* the best-known works from the most universally known body of Asian literature and lore in history. And, to legitimize their faking, they […] argue that the immigrants who settled and established Chinese America lost touch with Chinese culture, and that a faulty memory combined with new experience produced new versions of these traditional stories. This version of history is their contribution to the stereotype" (Chin, "Come All Ye" 3; emphasis added). Not incidentally, to Chin, a component of this "faking" consists in representing Chinese culture as exaggeratedly patriarchal and sexist.

In a 2013 study, Pamela Thoma analyzes a selection of recent works by Asian American women authors. She argues that these texts construct

forms of cultural citizenship that are typical of "our age" of neoliberalism. For Thoma, literary texts are, in the hands of Asian American women, instruments and realizations of "neoliberal belonging". Such belonging is negotiated using the forms and strategies of popular literature, including "chick lit". She comments on the specific targeting and role of women in the publishing market within (neo)liberal contexts: "[m]erchants are especially interested in devoted female book buyers, who predominate in every category of fiction and who purchase more books than men in the U.S." (Thoma 8). Thoma also claims that "Asian American women are a significant part of the renewal of the book, as author-producers and reader-consumers" (7). While the texts she considers span the late 1990s and the first decade of the new millennium, the aforementioned statement is relevant to the overall development, diffusion, and "mainstreamizing" of Asian American literature as a cultural development that has involved women authors, characters, readers, and scholars for at least two decades now.[13] In this regard, while the most recent "corpus" indicated by Thoma displays a number of characteristics of its own, its existence and success should be seen as being related to the emergence, during the period I have mentioned, of Asian American, and especially Asian American women's literature, into mainstream visibility. The genealogy of this female literary corpus can actually be retraced further back in time to the publication of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and, still further back, to texts such as Chuang Hua's *Crossings* (1968) which I examine in Chapter IV, Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945), and Edith Eaton's essays and short stories in the early decades of the twentieth century. Because of the period covered by my textual selection, I shall need to pay attention to how gender interacts with specific historical conditions—among others, those geopolitically determined by the Cold War.

On the other hand—going back to the "doubled" dimension that I believe must be taken into consideration—the years of the growth and commercial success of Asian American literature, and especially women's literature, were accompanied by the (direct or indirect) problematization of this very success on the part of (mostly women) scholars of feminist approach. With an amount of self-awareness, I follow in this feminist-oriented track, and, throughout the work, I attempt to make this book into an effort in feminist literary and cultural criticism. Since the early 1990s, it has become a widespread critical practice to read Asian American literature while paying attention to gender, sexuality, and their implications. This is, in many cases, a well-grounded practice, because of the very characteristics that the literary works display. My book also pays

attention to the dimensions of gender and sexuality in a number of ways. In terms of gender and gender-inflected theory, I mostly rely on Teresa de Lauretis, Judith Butler, and Mieke Bal. Their works, centered on the sexing of the social subject, the embodiment of cultural norms, and the deictic/dialogic dimension in which this embodiment occurs, are indispensable references for reading some of the mechanisms that are operating in the texts which I have selected. They also assist me in providing a theoretical background, with methodological implications, for the intersection of Asian American Studies with feminist criticism and theory—an intersection that has now more than two decades of history but whose deep implications may perhaps emerge more clearly through further investigation. In order to excavate some of those deeper implications, my study wants to tap the transnational potential of the intersection between gender, feminism, and Asian American discourse. In order to do so, besides expounding on some of the implications of feminist theory (especially Butler and Bal) to reflect on intersubjectivity and the creation of various communities, I shall pay attention to the development of gender categories in the modern transnational articulation of Chineseness. I shall attempt to demonstrate that the role of gender in my textual selection of Chinese American texts mirrors a mobilization and resignification of femininity that has not only been taking place on American soil, where Chinese migration has been arriving in waves for one century and a half, but also in other regions of the world where Chineseness is effective as a cultural force of negotiation and identification, of consent and conflict.

It is exactly in order to complicate and question both an American tendency toward conciliatory multiculturalism and a Sinocentric claim to an unbroken umbilical cord with the Chinese motherland that I have selected the works to which I will devote attention in this study. The construction of femininity offered by these works cannot be smoothly appropriated either by a teleology of assimilation of "Asianness" into "Americanness" (where Americanness is the utmost pole of female emancipation) or by an attempt to "freeze" an immutable female, yet paradoxically gender-neutralized Chineseness that is strategically deployed yet maintains an immutable core. As an alternative to both conceptions, female identity caught in the movement between China and America can also be conceived in terms of tension and unfinished construction. This tension can even be positive and enabling for the female subjects involved; this usually entails paying a high price, however, because the contexts wherein the female subjects act tend to scapegoat them. This tension takes on several forms, and I'm mostly interested in exploring two among these unfinished forms.

Firstly, I am interested in the very cultural constructedness of woman as a repository of culture—a constructedness which, in the novels, is both exemplified and criticized thorough the dramatization of a number of reading acts. I contend that my selected texts dramatize the (super)imposition of a number of "reading keys", culturally and historically motivated, on the female characters. Reading frames are mostly imposed by the male characters, but in some cases also by other female characters, like in the case of Sylvia vs. Mimi in *The Frontiers of Love*. Secondly, I am interested in how this construction of femininity revolves around a number of investments in innocence/guilt. An innocent femininity is, as noted above, the token of an unchanging, opaque Chineseness that resists the pressure of change and movement; nevertheless, innocence appears to be much more a projective wager on the part of cultural stakeholders than a pseudostate of nature that survives history. Innocence is shown to be as "cultural" and "constructed" as any other representation of femininity. Within this reading framework, which is an alternative to both models described above—the liberal multiculturalist and the Sinocentric—"female identity" is not necessarily an ahistorical quiddity to be liberated in the passage from "China" to "America", nor is it an innocent force to be recuperated; it is, instead, a flexible cultural construct deployed by conflicting or allied cultural discourses according to a number of different political agendas.

Different strategies in textual construction may accompany different configurations of femininity. Su-ching Huang ("Huayi lisan zuqun yishi ji huayi yimin rentong") maintains that a tendency exists, on the part of Western feminist critics, to devote their attention to narratives in which nonwestern women are emancipated from oppression only because of an enlightening encounter with the opportunities offered by the First World. As opposed to the pattern established by those narratives, Huang discusses two works of Chinese American literature: the English-language fictionalized biography *Thousand Pieces of Gold* (1981) by Ruthanne Lum McCunn, based on the life of Lalu Nathoy (later renamed Polly Bemis), a Chinese immigrant prostitute in the American West who eventually becomes a homesteader and marries her white lover; and Chinese-language novel *Sangqing yu Taohong* (1976) by Nie Hualing, first published in English translation in 1981 with the title *Mulberry and Peach: Two Women of China*. Chapter V will be devoted to an in-depth discussion of Nie's novel, the multiple reading contexts such a novel can be placed into, and its historical importance for the cultural history of Chinese America and Asian America. In Huang's reading, a peculiarity shared by *Thousand Pieces of Gold* and *Sangqing yu Taohong* consists in

foregrounding the selective—hence, I would add, un-innocent—nature of American melting pot narratives. It is no random chance, I would suggest, that both these narratives hinge on the eventual im/possibility of making room for a Chinese woman character in an acceptable rhetoric of Chinese Americanness. The notion of embodiment is crucial here. Embodiment is, following David Palumbo-Liu, both a material reality and a discursive device that reconnects/sutures the concrete and the abstract—according to a pattern, as we shall see, mainly elaborated by feminist theorists; besides, I would add, a logic of embodiment relates the individual dimension (often expressed in literature) to broader, collective patterns:

> By "Body", I mean both the material, corporeal forms of Asian American peoples and the semiotics of those forms—that is, both the objective body, with its particular inscriptions in material history, and the way that body is semiotically deployed in social and cultural discourse. The Body, as a somatic entity that exists within the contingencies of time and space, desire, need, gratification and denial, thus helps us maintain a sense of Asian America as imbricated in material history—specifically, immigration, economic, gender, and racial history. For instance, Asian America is deeply rooted in the history of both willed and forced migrations, of both national and global economic change, of wars of colonization, decolonization, and global strife, in which the general category of "Asian/American" is predicated upon the placement, the labor, and the sexual, economic, and social interactions of Asian American bodies. (Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American* 6)

To discuss the embodiment of norms at the suture between the individual subject and other forms of identification, besides Judith Butler, I indispensably rely on Michel Foucault's work on subjectivity, power, and embodiment. I also rely on the work of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. His reflections on the extraction of life—or, as he names it, "naked life"—as the ultimate goal of modern biopolitics (a Foucauldian concept) and the links between such operations and the construction of sovereignty and a number of collective bodies are instrumental—as it shall become clear at the end of the book—in reconnecting the discourse of the body to a discourse on the polity.

This study performs three acts of close reading that illuminate some founding instabilities of Asian American discourse, in its interaction with discourses on Chineseness, across the two decades between 1956 and 1976. The intrinsic instability and plurality of Asian American discourse has become an enabling force, instead of an impasse, since the early 1990s, with the success of the so-called diasporic paradigm. Accordingly,

a number of texts have received "belated" critical attention and have almost lived a "second life", a "second incarnation". I take this belatedness into account as follows. I attempt a serious engagement with some among the historical and cultural conditions that have led to the formation *and* inevitable contestation of Asian American cultural nationalism. In this sense, the success of the diasporic paradigm, and the recuperation of texts such as the ones under analysis here, has exposed (but also rearticulated) fissures and claims to territoriality and extraterritoriality that have always been a part of Asian American discourse—and that have, at the peak of diasporic criticism, been articulated according to partly modified interests. In other words, while I do need the diasporic turn to engage the texts, I hope to demonstrate that the texts anticipate the diasporic turn while also being profoundly steeped in the historical time of their production. I also retrace this tension in the engagement with Chineseness demonstrated by the texts. These novels articulate Chineseness against a backdrop of historical traumas and precarious conditions of tension, including the Cold War. In the texts, a literary engagement with Chineseness entails engagement with politics in an international dimension, and racial and/or cultural hybridization. New possibilities for embodying forms of Chinese identity, and forms of Chinese identity in the U.S., are staged in these novels, and problems of statehood, citizenship, war, international relations, revolution, migration, and cultural identity beyond and across borders are entwined in complex ways. A reappraisal of these texts and their founding ambivalences also sheds new light on the ambivalences of the so-called "cultural nationalist" phase of Asian American discourse, with its emphasis on "claiming America".[14]

The three novels that I analyze in detail offer three discrete yet related points of entry into the changing representational (as well as translational) politics of Chinese American women's writing during a period which culminates with the "official" entrance of Asian American women's literature into the publishing mainstream: the publication of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* in 1976. In all three novels, the stakes of cultural translation and hybridity are played out in the body. The body is cast in as the visible counterpart of the hybridization and cultural translation that takes place in a context and at a certain historical moment, ripe with references to other historical moments and events. The body is hybridity incarnate and the presence and visibility of the body simultaneously illuminate and reveal the context where hybridization and cultural translation—successful or failed attempts at both—occur. To illuminate the context and reveal its historical stratification also means to imagine other possible outcomes of history.

The first part, "Field to Text", lays out the theoretical/historical framework for the close readings to come.

In Chapter I, I provide a (necessarily) concise and selective outline of the development of the Asian American field, with special attention devoted to the tensions between aesthetics and politics, as well as between locality and globality, that accompany such development. In parallel, I evoke the problem of Chinese American literature as it is inevitably drawn into the sphere of the discourse on China, to the extent that China is not (and it cannot be) identified with one nation-state. Finally, at the end of the chapter, I outline the possibility, as well as the limits, of an encounter of Asian America with "China" as (to paraphrase Rey Chow) a "theoretical problem", and I maintain that this encounter may be productive if we pay attention, in a comparative perspective, to the historical accumulation, and the nowadays increasing dispersion, of the meaningful layers making up "Chineseness".

Chapter II tackles the complicated matter of the body and clarifies the historical/theoretical reasons for employing the body as a rhetorical construct and an analytical tool. These reasons include: the key role of gender in the Asian American debate since the 1970s; the role of gender in the creation of a modern/diasporic Chinese identity; and, grounding here my discourse in the work of theorists in feminist and cultural studies, an idea of the body as conterminous with "context", in the sense that each textual production takes place in a material and intersubjective context that can or should become in itself visible, readable, and analyzable.

In the second part, "Text to Field", I move on to the close readings.

Chapter III is a reading of an English-language novel published in 1956: Diana Chang's *The Frontiers of Love*. The chapter reconsiders Chang's historical importance as the first U.S.-born Chinese American to publish a novel in English. My critique positions *The Frontiers of Love* in the context of a preexisting tradition of representing Eurasianness, i.e. the condition of being of mixed "white" and "Asian" descent. I attempt to demonstrate that Chang both exploits this tradition and renovates it, specifically investing in "Chineseness" as a potentially hybrid identity *for the future*. This possibility is, at the same time, to be contextualized in a Cold War historical scenario. I also pay attention to the novel's explicit representation of sex, and gender roles, as identification/investment forms through which racial and cultural belonging take shape.

Chapter IV is a study of another English-language novel by a China-born Chinese American writer: Chuang Hua's (pen name and Chinese given name of Stella Yang Copley) *Crossings*, originally published in 1968 and reissued in 1986. Also in this case, I reconsider the role of the