ASIAN-AMERICAN LITERATURE: DIVING IN

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Sabbatical Project

Fall 2006-Spring 2007

Sabbatical Project Proposal for Fall 2006-Spring 2007

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Background Information

I have been teaching for 29 years—all of my adult life. It has been a long haul. Still, in many ways, I find myself surprised at the pleasure of it. I like being in that room, dusty with chalk though it may be, working with students, watching them struggle with new ideas and skills, pushing them along when they are reluctant, offering guidance when I can. When they seem particularly reluctant or ill at ease with a new reading or idea or peculiarity of English grammar, I sometimes offer this: Education is a word with interesting roots. The prefix E- means out—as in *evict, emit, eject*. The root DUC- means to lead, as in *aqueduct, conductor, and reduction*. Thus, education at its core is a chance to be led out—to go where you haven't been before. That is what I propose to do on my sabbatical: to study, in a rigorous, systematic way, an area that is new to me, an area that will enrich my life as a reader, thinker, teacher, citizen, and colleague. I am eager to step out, to immerse myself in new areas of study.

My Project: An Overview

I know nothing about Asian-American literature, aside from having done informal reading of a couple of works by Amy Tan. Here at Mt. SAC, I teach a large number of Asian students. I would like to—I should be able to—use and recommend texts that will speak to their lives, their life experiences, but I cannot. My project will focus on Asian-American literature, including autobiography, fiction, poetry, and film. My studies will begin with a look at some of the

traditions within the literature of Asia to provide me with a sense of some of the patterns and motifs that may influence the writings of some Asian Americans. I will then proceed with a broad overview of Asian American literature as it is represented in *Charlie Chan is Dead: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction,* edited by Jessica Hagedorn. This substantial work, which has been called the first major anthology of Asian American fiction, will give me an overview of the themes and authors prominent in this area. I will also read an anthology of Asian American poetry, such as *Breaking Silence: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Poets,* edited by Joseph Bruchac. Having accomplished this overview of short fiction and poetry, I will then turn to the novels and autobiographies of those writers whose work most interested me from the anthology. I am interested in examining writing from a number of Asian American cultures, including works by Filipino, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indian, and Vietnamese writers. The writers I choose will come out of my preliminary research, but they will include such writers as Carlos Bulosan, David Wong Louie, Chitra Divakaruni, and Maxine Hong Kingston.

In addition to the work I do with written texts, I will also explore films that are directed by and/or that deal with the Asian American experience. Jim Burke, in his remarkable book *Illuminating Texts: How to Teach Students to Read the World,* argues that visual literacy will be a vital part of literacy for students and citizens of the 21st century. I have long used films in my writing and literature classes, ranging from *Stand and Deliver* in developmental classes to *Smoke Signals* in mythology classes to *Fast, Cheap, and Out of Control* in critical thinking classes. I also taught my first Introduction to Cinema class recently. These experiences have led me to understand the power of film as text for

students, the rich discussions and papers that can arise from viewing films, and my own need and desire for a deeper and broader knowledge of film. My studies in film will include primary sources—the films themselves—as well as secondary sources about those films. I will begin my film emphasis by examining the works of Japanese master director Kurosawa and will then examine the works of Ang Lee, a contemporary Asian-American director.

The Product of the Project

The visible product of my scholarly research will take two forms: notes and casebooks. The notes will cover my preliminary overview work; these notes will include pertinent biographical information on authors or directors, brief summaries of their key works as presented in the anthologies and novels that I read and the films that I view, and notes about recurring images, themes, and issues in their work. The casebooks will focus on three authors and three films that I select to research more intensively. Each casebook will include notes about the author or director, summaries of the major works studied, lists of recurrent themes and images, a sampling of critical articles about each author/director, and a list of study questions that would be useful for me or other faculty doing a unit on that author/director. These products—both the notes and the casebooks—will be a useful learning tool and resource for my future studies and teaching.

The final report will compile the notes and case studies for both parts of the project, with a brief introduction and overview. Because of the wide range of my studies, notes and casebooks will be compiled as I move through my studies

so that they will be as fresh, accurate, and pertinent as possible. A time line for my research for both semesters is attached.

Benefits to the College and Students

This project will offer benefits to me, to me department, to the college, and to my students. To become the student rather than the teacher will renew me, both for the intellectual stimulation that such studies will offer and for the reminder of what it feels like to be learning new and challenging material. I will also bring my knowledge and enthusiasm for these studies into my classes; both topics are particularly amenable to being integrated into many courses, whether they are developmental writing classes or literature classes. As for my department, I will make these materials available to colleagues; I did this with my last study project, both by offering them to individuals and by putting them in the English Department's resource library. They have been used by new faculty and veteran faculty who were facing unfamiliar class preps or who just wanted another perspective on materials they had taught many times before. Were there any interest in either topic, I would be willing to offer Staff Development classes or workshops if asked. Finally, my students would profit from having courses that incorporate a richer, more diverse and informed offering of literature and film.

Date	**Area of Study**	**Sample Texts** **(List to be expanded based on initial research)**
Aug.-Sept.	Introduction to Asian Literature	*Literatures of Asia,* Tony Barnstone, ed.
Oct.-Nov.	Introduction to Asian American Lit	*Charlie Chan is Dead,* Jessica Hagedorn, ed. *The Big Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Chinese-American and Japanese-American Literature*, Jeffrey Chan, ed.
Dec.	Autobiographies and Non-Fiction	*America is in the Heart* by C. Bulosan *Farewell to Manzanar* by J. Houston *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* by A. Fadiman

Jan.	Poetry	*Breaking the Silence*, Joseph Bruchach, ed.
		The Open Boat: Poems from Asian America, Garrett Hongo, ed.
Feb.	Short Stories	*Pangs of Love* by David Wong Louie
		I Tell You Now, Eds. Brian Swann and A. Krupat

March	Novels	*The Mistress of Spices* by C. Divakaruni
		Monkey Bridge by Lan Cao
		No-No Boy by J. Okada
		Woman Warrior by Maxine Hong Kingston
		Bone by Fae Myenne Ng
		The Joy Luck Club by Amy Tan
		Native Speaker by Chang-Rae Lee
April-May.	Films	Films by Kurosawa:
		Seven Samurai
		Rashoman
		Ran
		Films by Mira Nair:
		Monsoon Wedding

Mississippi Masala

Salaam Bombay!

Vanity Fair

Films by Ang Lee

Eat, Drink, Man, Woman

Wedding Banquet

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon

Sense and Sensibility

The Ice Storm

Statement of Purpose

The aim of my project was two-fold:

1) to extend my awareness of Asian American literature, including non-fiction, fiction, poetry, and film,

2) to create a resource for faculty (primarily but not exclusively in the English Department) on Asian-American Literature, which would provide information about my research, including plot overviews, commentaries, suggested course levels, and bibliographic information.

Sabbatical Report

As is true of any exploration, my journey into Asian American Literature involved a number of turns, reversals, and unexpected paths. In my original sabbatical proposal, I proposed to "be led out," to be educated in the world of Asian American Literature. I look back at that proposal understanding another truism about education: to be educated is to understand how little that you know. In reading the materials and viewing the films for this project, I had a door opened for me into a new world. It is a vast world, much larger and more complex than I had imagined. My report will provide a look at some of the turns and paths I took as I began my exploration of the rich and varied world of Asian American literature.

I opened my project by reading in *Literatures of Asia*, an anthology edited by Tony Barnstone of Whittier College. The text is divided into three major sections: India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh; China; Japan. It soon became clear to me that while these works were interesting in and of themselves, reading translations of the Upanishads or translations of poems from the Tang Dynasty would contribute little to my understanding of Asian American texts. This sense was confirmed as I began reading Aiiieeeee*! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*, the first published collection of works by Asian Americans. In many ways that seminal text, edited by Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong, shaped the readings upon which I would eventually focus my studies and the questions I would ask about them.

Aiiieeee!, published in 1973, raises a number of crucial ideas and questions that remain central to the study of Asian American literature. In their fierce and sometimes polemical introduction, the editors make this major assertion: "the existence of Asian-

American sensibilities and cultures...might be related to but are distinct from Asia and white America" (viii). For these writers, a look at the traditions of literature in Asia is simply beside the point. For them, in a view probably intensified by its time and place—San Francisco in the late 60s and early 70s—Asian American writers bring to their work a unique sensibility, a new language, a new perspective that is all their own. Even their definition of Asian American is complex: they distinguish between Asian-American writers (and these include those who were born here as well as those who were born in Asia but who came here so early that they have little memory of life in Asia) and a group they call Americanized Chinese writers. Among the latter they include Jade Snow Wong, author of the frequently anthologized *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, a work they hold in disdain as one of a number of "manifestoes of Chinese-American identity and assimilation" (xiv). *Aiiieeeee!* makes clear some of the complexities and conflicts embedded in identifying Asian American writers and their roles and choices as writers. As part of their discussion of the roles and concerns of Asian American writing, the editors also critique the notion of being torn between two cultures, which is so central to much minority literature, a notion described eloquently by W.E.B. Dubois as "the divided self." This they simply dismiss as a "goofy concept of the dual personality," arguing that "neither Asian culture nor American culture was equipped to define us except in the most superficial terms" (viii). The central argument of this text, then, is that Asian American writers—and by this they mean Chinese-, Japanese-, and Filipino-Americans—write in a style and language and context that is uniquely their own, a kind of third space, set apart.

Here perhaps was my first "turning" on the sabbatical path. I understood that the Asian American writers I would be reading would not be harking back to the forms of

literature of Asia, ancient or contemporary; I also understood that the field was divided, politicized in ways I had not expected. Yet, even as I appreciated the space that the editors of *Aiieeeee!* were trying to carve for themselves, I was uneasy about a couple of things. First, in an anthology introduced with a section called "Fifty Years of Our Whole Voice," that "whole voice" included only three women in an anthology of fourteen writers. I was troubled, too, by their flippant and derisive dismissal of writers such as Jade Snow Wong. Her experience was not their experience; her aims were not their aims. But should not "the whole voice" include other voices, too, even those who seem too assimilationist or too exotic? Admittedly, this is a thorny question in a context which had made the diminutive and comical Charlie Chan the sole Asian image widely available to a culture that was already inclined (no, committed) to xenophobia. Clearly, Chin, Chan, Inada, and Wong were staking out crucial space and claiming their right to speak and be heard in a culture that had misheard or ignored them for too long, a point they emphasize by entitling the anthology section of their text "We Are Not New Here."

These issues are further complicated in an essay by Elaine Kim, written twenty years after the publication of *Aiieeee!,* as a preface to a fiction anthology entitled *Charlie Chan is Dead*. First, two decades after the publication of that first *Aiiieeeee!*, the definition of Asian American had broadened considerably. According to Kim, the "massive and highly visible transformations in Asian American communities" included increases of "500 to 1000% among some Asian and Pacific American populations" (xi). Thus, *Charlie Chan is Dead*, coming just twenty years after *Aiiieeeee!*, includes forty-eight writers, not just fourteen, and those writers come not only from Chinese-, Japanese, and Filipino-American backgrounds. This text, edited by Jessica Hagedorn, also includes

Korean American, Vietnamese American, Hawaiian, Pakistani-American, and writers from across the Pacific Rim. (Interestingly, Oscar Penaranda had argued in *Aiiieeeee*! that "We cannot write any literary background [of Filipino American literature] because there isn't any. No history. No published literature. No nothing. Just 'Flips' all over the place" (xlix). Jessica Hagedorn, herself a Filipina, faced no such constraints in putting her anthology together.) Elaine Kim raises further questions about the world of Asian American literature as represented by *Aiiieeeee!* when she writes,

> The sacred Asian American texts—such as Carlos Bulosan's *America is in The Heart,* John Okada's *No-No Boy*, and Louis Chu's *Eat a Bowl of Tea* [all three of which are included in *Aiiieeeee!*]—were by "dead yellow men" instead of "dead white men." Asian American literary studies usually did not question the concept of canonization but simply posited an alternative canon. (ix)

Clearly, the passing of two decades shifted notions about who might be included as Asian American writers. Kim also questions some of the tenets about themes that had been embraced by earlier writers and scholars (including herself.) She directly questions some of the views raised in *Aiiieeeee!*, for instance, the belief in "dividing 'Asian American' from 'Asian' as sharply as possible, privileging race over gender and class, accepting compulsory heterosexuality as 'natural,' and constructing a hierarchy of authenticity to separate the 'real' from the 'fake'" (ix). The path that this reading led me to, then, suggested several key points: 1) that I would encounter a broad range of writers, themes, and texts; 2) that this range would reflect changes over time within the field; and 3) that the scholarship within the field would be divided and spirited. Kim's essay also made me question some of the preconceptions with which I had entered the project. The very

themes I had expected—"protest and exile...place and displacement...[the search for a] psychic and physical 'home'"—would be present, but to look for only those themes, Kim suggests, would limit my understanding, homogenizing the literature rather than appreciating it for its diversity and complexity (ix).

A more recent anthology further readied me for diving in to a literature that I increasingly understood would be diverse and complex. This text was *Bold Words: A Century of Asian American Writing,* edited (tellingly, I think) by Rajini Srikanth and Esther Y. Iwanaga. This text, having been published in 2001, came just eight years after *Charlie Chan is Dead.* Srikanth raises an interesting critique of earlier anthologies—suggesting yet another new path for me—because they "reproduce traditional paradigms of Asian American literature, a model that privileges writing by East Asian Americans, that illuminates California-centric experiences, that focuses on the United States as the primary site of emotional allegiance" (xv). This anthology tries to "re-create the sense of a vast and incompletely knowable Asian America" (xvi). It also acknowledges a trend that I had not fully considered—that there are two trajectories in Asian American literature, one that is centered primarily in the United States and one that includes "ancestral homelands and diasporic locations outside the United States" (xviii). This notion became pivotal to me when I began reading novels and memoirs, especially those of Anchee Min and Lisa See, whose work often is located in ancestral homelands that are both geographically and chronologically distant. This was a direction I had not originally expected; I had imagined that Asian American literature would concern itself primarily with life here in the United States and with the complications that inevitably arise for immigrants and their children. *Bold Words* and my subsequent reading of a number of

novels and memoirs showed me the importance that ancestral homelands would have for a number of these writers, many of whom would travel to their families' land of origin for the first time as adults, something we see indirectly in Lisa See's works and more directly in works such as Andrew Pham's *Catfish and Mandala: A Two-Wheeled Voyage Through the Landscape and Memory of Vietnam.*

One more secondary text, reviewed in detail later in this project, was particularly useful in framing my thinking as I read: Linda Perrin's *Coming to America: Immigrants from the Far East.* While this text's brief histories of Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, and Vietnamese immigration were invaluable, I was even more struck by a three-page list at the very close of the book entitled "A Brief History of U.S. Immigration Laws." Having been raised in the South, I knew too well the history of cultural racism upheld by law, but I had not fully understood the systematic and long-term racist legislation that had been faced by Asian immigrants, particularly on the West Coast. This list provided a context for a range of the works I would go on to read and view, ranging from Carlos Bulosan's autobiography *America is in the Heart* to Lisa See's non-fiction account of her family's history in *On Gold Mountain* to Wayne Wang's film *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, based on the Louis Chu novel. A sample listing of these laws is instructive: The First Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882; the 1907 Exclusion Act which banned "persons detrimental to labor conditions in the United States, specifically Japanese and Korean skilled or unskilled laborers" (173); the Act of 1917 which added a literacy test and further restricted entry of other Asians. Knowing of these laws and attitudes was to be crucial as I encountered in short stories, novels, and films the effects that the laws had on Asian immigrant families and communities.

Having read and studied this range of background and secondary texts, I was ready to “dive in”—to read short stories, poems, novels and to view films that promised such variety and challenge. So dive in I did, though I did make another turn from my original thinking about the texts upon which I would focus. Although India and Pakistan are part of Asia, I understood that I needed to focus on the East Asian American writers, as there was so much to be learned in that arena. As I read, I realized too that not all of the works I read would be useful for the final product of this project. I had envisioned both enriching my own life as reader, thinker, teacher, and citizen; I also wanted, however, to create a product that would be useful for me and for other faculty in making lesson plans, developing curricula, and recommending texts to interested students. Thus I read some works but chose not to write about them when I understood that I would not recommend their use in our classes. Some works, particularly in *Aiieeeee!*, seemed products of their times, dated by language or theme. Frank Chin’s *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, for instance, or Jeffery Paul Chan’s “”Chinese in Haifa” seemed rooted in their 60s and 70s sensibilities, with their descriptions of an array of 60s figures: one “who trips to Pittsburgh to conjure with his childhood friend, another “a zombie with taps on his shoes,” and one who is forever rolling joints from an envelope filed under D for dope (50). Similarly, some of the works in *Charlie Chan is Dead* seemed interesting for reading but not appropriate for teaching; I imagine, for instance, my developmental and non-native students being particularly lost if they were asked to read Lois-Ann Yamanaka’s “Empty Heart,” which is written in the pidgin English of fourth-generation sugar plantation workers in Hawaii.

The work of the project, then, became to read, re-read, reflect, discarding some works as interesting but not useful for my purposes and choosing others to write about. I thought I had a grasp of some of the major writers, but for every work I read, I discovered five more that I should read. I fell in love with the works of Lisa See, the films of Wayne Wang, the fiction of Chang-Rae Lee. In exploring film, I soon realized that, just as the ancient literary texts of Asia had little bearing on my reading of contemporary Asian American fiction, so too were the films of Kurasawa, no matter how magnificent, of little relevance to my examination of the works of contemporary Asian American films. There were other surprises along the way. I was familiar with the films of Ang Lee, for instance, but my discovery of Wayne Wang's films led me in new directions. For both Ang Lee and Wayne Wang, I struggled as I realized that I was most moved by and interested in their smaller films, the films that focused on Asian American experience. As both directors moved toward mainstream (non-Asian-focused) Hollywood films such as Lee's *Sense and Sensibility* or Wang's *Maid in Manhattan,* of all things, I was less interested. This returned me to the questions raised in my earliest readings of secondary sources. By preferring their Asian material, was I validating them only as representatives of the Other experience? Or was the division simply a matter of what I believe to be the inevitable shift in quality between smaller independent films and Hollywood blockbusters? I returned to the question raised by Frank Chin and others at the beginning of my project: What is Asian American literature? Is it simply a product of someone who has Asian ancestry? Or is it, as the writers of *Aiieeeee!* postulated over thirty years ago, the product more of a sensibility than a birthplace? Must its themes grapple overtly with being an outsider, an immigrant, torn between two worlds? Perhaps it is enough to say,

with Elaine Kim, "Charlie Chan is indeed dead, never to be revived," replaced not by model minorities but by the closeted Chinese son, the Vietnamese American bicyclist, the Filipino on "The Price is Right" (xiii). The Asian American experience, while it shares issues common to immigrants and common in particular to Asians who faced racism supported by a long history of anti-Asian legislation, is not a single experience. The Chinese have been in the United States for over one hundred years, while the Vietnamese have been here for several decades. Filipinos have faced a special kind of debilitation in being part of America but being apart in the most profound sense. To read Asian American literature is to have a sense of the James Joyce line: "Here comes everybody." Having read nearly one hundred works by and about Asian Americans, I look to my future reading with joy and anticipation--that I have ahead of me the opportunity to continue to read and watch and learn a body of literature that is central to any real understanding of American experience and the American literature that examines that experience.

Conclusion on Significance of the Project

I wrote my notes both for myself and for fellow faculty members interested in beginning to study Asian American literature. I divided the notes into several sections: Non-Fiction, Fiction, Poetry, and Film. Because so many of our students are Asian American, I believe that we should try to include these voices in the readings for our classes. I will be offering these notes to fellow faculty members in the English Department; I will also make copies available to the AmLa and Lern Departments. I know that I will be using a number of these readings and films in my own classes.

On a personal note, I am extraordinarily grateful for this sabbatical year. It gave me a much-needed chance to rest, restore, and renew; I can return to my life in the classroom with energy and a new intellectual pursuit that will sustain me in years to come.

Works Cited List for Report

Barnstone, Tony. *Literatures of Asia.* New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2003.

Chin, Frank, *et al.* *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers.* Washington D.C. : Howard University Press, 1974.

Hagedorn, Jessica. *Charlie Chan is Dead: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction.* New York: Penguin Books, 1993.

Perrin, Linda. *Coming to America.* New York: Dell Publishing, 1980.

Srikanth, Rajini and Esther Iwanaga. *Bold Words: A Century of Asian American Writing.* New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2001.

NON-FICTION TEXTS

America is in the Heart by Carlos Bulosan

Plot Overview

Carlos Bulosan's autobiography is a major work of Asian American literature, the first major memoir by a Filipino, a well-known poet who tells the searing story of his life of poverty in a rural farming community in the Philippines and of his search for stability and a place in an America that was ultimately just as brutal as the life he left behind. Part One of the book focuses in twelve chapters on his life as a child in the Philippines as he watches his father lose his farm, bit by bit, to unfeeling and opportunistic landlords. In this section, a pattern for his life seems to be set: it is as if he is in a pinball machine, battered by outside forces and events that seem wholly out of his control. In Part Two, he tells in vivid detail of his journeys up and down the west coast, moving back and forth between Seattle and Los Angeles, in search of work, ultimately finding himself in the precarious position of doing farm labor, which offers no stability or comfort. In Parts Three and Four, his itinerant life continues, with violence and poverty permeating his life and the lives of his "Pinoy" brothers and friends. In these chapters, he begins to find his

voice—reading voraciously during a long convalescence for TB, writing for small Filipino newspapers, writing and producing pamphlets in support of unions for immigrant workers, and ultimately writing this straightforward story of relentless loss and disappointment, though he continues to come back to a sweet sense of hopefulness that is remarkable in light of the prejudice, poverty, oppression, and bad luck which dogged his life as he pursued an elusive American dream.

Commentary

This is a daunting, bleak book, but it's fascinating in its portrayal of an immigrant group which often lies under the radar in contemporary culture; I had no idea of the degree of racism that confronted Filipino immigrants in the American West in the 1930s and 1940s. It's interesting, too, because of all of its local references: I know many of the downtown streets where he spent time in Los Angeles, and he mentions many towns and suburbs that will be familiar to readers from Southern California. This book is not complex in its structure or prose, but for me, Bulosan's genuine, earnest voice and his powerful courage in the face of enormous struggle make it well worth reading.

Appropriate Courses

Excerpts in English 68 or 1A

Bibliographic Information

Bulosan, Carlos. *America is in the Heart: A Personal History.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973.

ISBN 0-295-95289-X

Autobiography: 48 chapters, 327 pages

The Woman Warrior by Maxine Hong Kingston

Plot Overview

The winner of the 1976 National Book Critics Circle Award for non-fiction, this is an imaginative and lyrical memoir, unusual in form and focus. Hong Kingston does not follow the strict chronology of a conventional autobiography; instead, she offers snapshots of her life through five sections or vignettes. The first, "No Name Woman," is (was?) often anthologized in Freshman Composition Readers; it tells the riveting story of the public shaming of her aunt, her father's sister, who, because she had committed adultery, was attacked by villagers in a village in China and committed suicide; her very existence is now denied by the family except in whispers of stories such as the one told to Hong Kingston by her mother. In this vignette, Hong Kingston seems to be restoring her aunt's identity as she imagines the aunt's feelings and motivations in both her infidelity and her suicide. "White Tigers" begins with a fabulist story of a swordswoman, a slayer of dragons, a story compared to which, as Hong Kingston humorously points out in the

second half of the vignette, "My American life has been such a disappointment" (45). In "Shaman," we hear of her mother's schooling and experiences as she learned both traditional, shamanistic medicine and its Western complements; the section shows us her practice of both. In "At the Western Palace," Hong Kingston presents the black comedy of her mother as a woman who wields not her sword, not her magic, but her words and her will: she—named for the first time in the memoir as Brave Orchid—brings her sister Moon Orchid over from China, forces her to travel to L.A. and confront the husband whom she has not seen for decades, then nurses Moon Orchid as she loses her mind. In the last section, "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," Hong Kingston, in a really remarkable feat of story telling, tells of her own struggle to find and exert her voice. This is no story of meek humiliation; we see her take on her mother's fierceness in the sequence of events that finally allows her to speak out, speak up, and seek to make her way in the world of "ghosts."

Commentary

This is a book that has been on my "to read" shelf for decades. I'm not sure, really, why I struggled with it for so long. I had always loved the "No Name Woman" section that I'd read in anthologies. Perhaps it's the magic realism/fabulist aspect that had turned me away; Harry Potter notwithstanding, I am not generally drawn to fantasy. But I am grateful to this project for having spurred me to read the whole text. It really is remarkable, poetic, and complex. For me, it is most powerful when she is "story-talking" about the real events in her past, but all of it is imaginatively conceived, and it presents a powerful picture of the divisions within families, between what is said and what is

unsaid, what is expected and what *is*. As a whole, the text might best be suited for a 1B or literature class, though excerpts could certainly be used in 1A or, if used judiciously and with supporting materials, in 68.

At the invitation of my friend and colleague Debra Farve, I did get a chance to go see and hear Maxine Hong Kingston at Claremont. The focus of the talk was not her own writing but the work she has done with soldiers writing about their experiences in war, a project she undertook not only for the powerful writing that was possible but also for the healing that such writing could bring. She has a lovely presence, a poet's affection for the world and a humanist's sympathy for people that made the evening a real pleasure.

Appropriate Courses

1B, Images of Women in Literature

Bibliographic Information

Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior*. New York: Vintage Books, 1975

ISBN 0-679-72188-6

Memoir/Autobiography: 209 pages, five sections

"The Faintest Echo of Our Language" by Chang-Rae Lee

Plot Overview

Korean American Chang Rae-Lee writes movingly here of the death of his mother. It begins with the line, "My mother died on a bare January morning in our family room, the room all of us favored" (20); the paragraph continues with a series of sentences, each of which begins, "She died," achieving a kind of incantatory effect as he comes to grips with his loss. The essay is a meditation, a rumination about his mother, about loss, about language and its power: speaking, not speaking, choosing not to speak, being unable to do so.

Commentary

This is a lovely piece, complex and elegant, moving back and forth between the deathbed scene and the memories of his mother and family that are evoked in those final hours. I can imagine it being used in courses that examine the language issues faced by immigrants, family dynamics, or perhaps even nursing—an examination of the effect of cancer on a family and the different ways that people respond to it.

Appropriate Courses

English 1A, Creative Writing/Memoirs

Bibliographic Information

Lee, Chang-Rae. "The Faintest Echo of Our Language." ." In *Bold Words: A Century of Asian American Writing.* Eds. Rajini Srikanth and Ester Y. Iwanaga. University Press, USA: Rutgers University, 2001. Pp. 21-28.

ISBN 0-8135-2966-2

Personal essay. 8 pages.

From *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands* by Shirley Geok-Lin Lim

Plot Overview

In this excerpt from her memoir, poet Shirley Geok-Lin Lim contemplates the effect that motherhood has on her as she struggles with anxiety about having her child feel at home and welcome in the American landscape in which she was born. This anxiety, of course, is not just about the child but is also about herself—is she a good enough mother, will she be a help or a hindrance to her vulnerable but willful child? She examines in particular her shame at slapping her baby in times of frustration, just as she had been slapped by her father. In her desperation to ease her child's path, her own way is plagued by uncertainty and doubt.

Commentary

This is a thought-provoking piece which on the one hand raises familiar themes about the feeling of isolation and "otherness" experienced by immigrants. But it raises

larger questions about parenthood—approaches to parenting, grappling with parental aspirations, the human tendency to project upon our children our own deepest needs and insecurities. This would be a useful reading in a class focusing on parents and children.

Appropriate Courses

English 1A, Teacher Prep classes, English 68/1A paired with Child Development classes

Bibliographic Information

Lim, Shirley Geok-Lin Lim. From *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands*. In *Bold Words: A Century of Asian-American Writing*. Eds. Rajini Srikanth and Esther Iwanaga. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2001. Pp. 29-37.

ISBN 0-8315-2966-2

Excerpt from memoir: 9 pages

Falling Leaves by Adeline Yen Mah

Plot Overview

This memoir is set first in China, where Adeline Yen Mah was born in 1937, a time of social and political upheaval. It is, as one critic puts it, a kind of Cinderella story, as Yen Mah, whose mother dies giving birth to her, endures a life of stunning hostility and emotional abuse from her stepmother, and neglect and complicit abuse from her father. Although she does get an education and financial support from them, her life is a long battle to earn the attention and love of her parents, a battle that continues through her time in medical school and on to her marriage and medical practice in Huntington Beach, California.

Commentary

As a Western reader. I struggled with Adeline Yen Mah's continued desire to win over her truly awful stepmother and her only slightly less awful father. The book demonstrates clearly the incredibly strong sense of filial loyalty that is part of traditional Chinese culture. The book also makes concrete a number of Chinese historical references, ranging from Chiang Kai-Shek to Mao Zedong to Tiananmen Square. It does include an interesting array of images of women, including the malicious and evil stepmother, the long-suffering and noble aunt, and the stubborn young Jane Eyresque heroine. This is a compelling book. Reading guides are available at www.randomhouse.com/resources/rgg.html, and Yen Mah has her own website at www.adlineyenmah.com.

Appropriate Courses

English 1A, English 1B, Images of Women in Literature

Bibliographic Information

Yen Mah, Adeline. *Falling Leaves: The Memoir of an Unwanted Chinese Daughter.* New York: Broadway Books, 1997.

ISBN 0-7679-0357-9

Autobiography/Memoir: 274 pages, 32 chapters.

Excerpt from *Thousand Pieces of Gold*

by Ruthanne Lum McCunn

Plot Overview

In this truly remarkable excerpt from the highly respected biography of Lalu Nathoy, we read of her arrival to San Francisco in 1872, where she was to be auctioned off as a slave. She arrives believing, as did so many immigrants of her time, that she had come to a land of gold and riches that were just waiting to be plucked from the streets. She is in for a brutal awakening when she instead faces the terror and humiliation of being put on an auction block—a fate which, shockingly, is not as bad as that faced by the young girls who traveled with her, believing that they were coming with marriage contracts in hand, only to discover that they had been sold into prostitution.

Commentary

I discovered Ruthanne Lum McCunn, a Eurasian who was born in San Francisco, raised in Hong Kong, and educated in both Chinese and in English, quite late in my sabbatical project; I look forward to reading her *The Moon Pearl*, which was chosen by the American Library Association as "The Best of the

Best." Her novel *Thousand Pieces of Gold* is based on the true story of Lalu Nathoy, who later became known as Polly Bemis, who was auctioned off and worked her way to freedom, a remarkable woman well known and respected in the Pacific Northwest. Ruthanne McCunn has a web site which includes information on her other books and a fascinating array of pictures of Lalu Nathoy/Polly Bemis. I plan to use this segment in my English 67 section on early immigration stories, coupling it with Irving Howe's piece on Ellis Island and Gerald Keegan's diary of coming to Canada on board the ship the Naparima during the Irish potato famine. (I did read the full novel after my initial work on this excerpt; it is a very good book that would work well in its entirety in English 67.)

Appropriate Courses

English 67, English 68

Bibliographic Information

McCunn, Ruthanne Lum. Excerpt from *Thousand Pieces of Gold.* In *Charlie Chan is Dead: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction.* Ed. Jessica Hagedorn. New York: Penguin Books, 1993. Pp. 314-321.

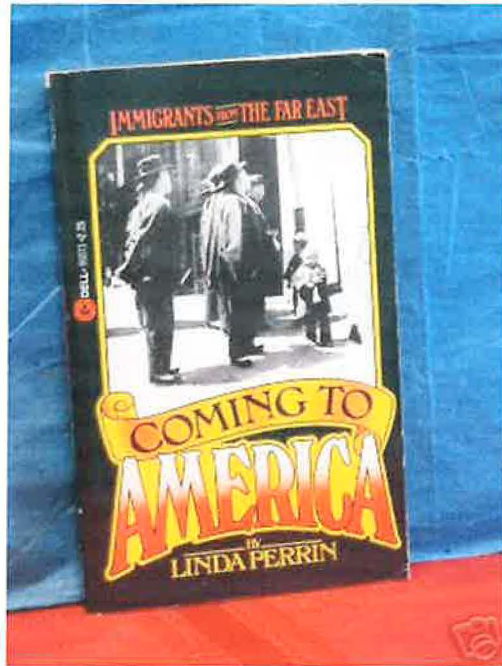
McCunn, Ruthanne Lum. *Thousand Pieces of Gold.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1981.

ISBN 0-14-023111-0 (anthology); 0-932538-08-8 (primary source/novel)

Biography: Excerpt, 8 pages; novel, 308 pages.

Coming to America: Immigrants from the Far East

by Linda Perrin



Plot Overview

This is an interesting, accessible rendering of the experiences of Asians in America since the Gold Rush. Included are sections on immigrants from China, Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam, with excerpts from letters, interviews, newspapers, and diaries. There are fourteen pages of pictures, from Filipino grape pickers to the Japanese internment camp at Manzanar.

Commentary

This text provides an excellent overview of history that would be useful for any faculty member preparing to use texts that are based on Asian immigrant experience. I tried to order it for an English 67 course that focuses on

immigration issues and literature, but it is currently out of print. Copies are, however, available at sources like Amazon.

Appropriate Courses

Not applicable—out of print.

Bibliographic Information

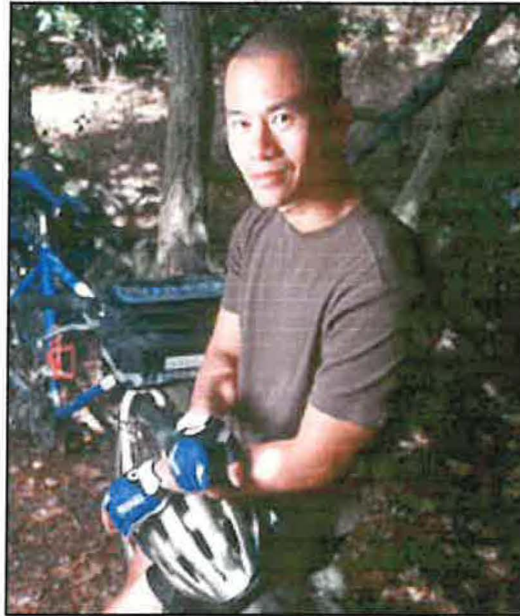
Perrin, Linda. *Coming to America.* New York: Dell Publishing, 1980.

ISBN: 0-440-91073-0

Non-Fiction: 156 pages, 15 chapters

Catfish and Mandala: A Two-Wheeled Voyage Through the Landscape and Memory of Vietnam

By Andrew X. Pham



Plot Overview

This is a remarkable first-person narrative about a journey—a trip both physically and emotionally arduous as immigrant Pham returns to his homeland, traveling by bicycle from San Jose, California north to Seattle, then flying to Vietnam with a forty-five day layover in Japan. He rides the length of Vietnam, enduring enormous physical difficulties and a disorienting combination of loneliness, alienation, and warm welcome as he explores the country that he and his family left in a harrowing boat escape at the end of the war. Intercut with Pham's descriptions of his experiences on this odyssey are flashbacks—of their life in Vietnam, of their escape, of their lives in America, and of the family pain and secret in the face of his sister Chi's transsexuality and suicide. As he travels,

Pham confronts the difficulties of both his present and his past as he seeks to resolve them.

Commentary

I was delighted to find this book, a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year and a *San Francisco Chronicle* Bestseller; it is, as one reviewer puts it, "engaging…singular…and mesmerizing." I was glad, too, to have a text written by a male Vietnamese American since so many of the texts I've read were written by women. This book could easily be excerpted for English 68 and 1A; it would also be fascinating in a 1A course focusing on odysseys. It would pair beautifully, for instance, with Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild* or Sean Penn's film adaptation of that text. It might also pair nicely with Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge*, as both deal with the aftermath of the Vietnam War.

For me, one of the most striking aspects of the book is the picture of poverty that it presents, particularly in the countryside of Vietnam. It is a very different setting than the beautiful rice paddies and jungles we get in commercial film and advertising. Pham's experience of being besieged by expectations from poverty-stricken friends and relatives who believe him—and all Americans—to be wealthy would strike a familiar chord for our students who travel back and forth between here and their family homes in Mexico and the Philippines.

The central complication of teaching this book (besides the need for a map so that students can orient themselves and follow his journey) is the time shifting. Students might need help in negotiating those shifts in the narrative time line.

Appropriate Classes

Excerpts in 68 or 1A; complete text in 1A

Bibliographic Information

Pham, Andrew X. *Catfish and Mandala: A Two-Wheeled Voyage Through the Landscape and Memory of Vietnam.* New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1999.

ISBN 0-312-26717-7

Autobiography: 342 pages

On Gold Mountain: The One-Hundred-Year Odyssey of My Chinese-American Family by Lisa See

Plot Summary

This is a meticulously researched and fascinating look at Lisa See's family's roots in China and in the United States, most especially the saga of Fong See, her great-grandfather, who left China in 1871, made his fortune on "the Gold Mountain" (the Chinese name for the United States), and lived to be one hundred years old. It's an amazing story, deeply rooted in Los Angeles and Pasadena history. Fong See had several wives, including See's Caucasian great-grandmother, whose children went on to establish the See name, and a much-younger Chinese wife, a sixteen-year-old who married him when he was sixty-four. Their children were the Fongs. This memoir is, as See puts it, "the story of the Sees and the Fongs and how they assimilated into America" (xvii). The book provides a highly readable narrative of this fascinating family; it also gives an

interesting look at local history—the place of Chinese immigrants in Los Angeles history, and, most interestingly for me, the history of our current Chinatown, which came after the first Chinatown was destroyed.

Commentary

At the risk of sounding not particularly academic, I'll just say this: this is a terrific book. It's one of those that I will return to re-read, slowing down to savor the level of detail and to understand more fully the history that it lays out. The place of women in the story, the polygamy with which the men solidify their status and power, is disturbing, but I read the story of Fong See and his perseverance and strength with a kind of grudging admiration, though I grieved about the impact that his multiple marriages had on the bright and courageous young woman who married him in spite of laws forbidding interracial marriages, See's great-grandmother, Letticie Pruett.

I went to hear Lisa See speak at Vroman's Bookstore in Pasadena, where there was standing room only—people packed into aisles, sitting on tables and on the floor, with many of her family members present. When my friend Deborah asked about the difference between writing this non-fiction book and her fiction, See explained that this book had the deepest resonance for her—as a way of honoring and preserving her family's legacy, as a way of connecting to her elders, and as a way of finding a place for herself as a woman who, because she looks Caucasian but feels Chinese, feels like an outsider in both worlds.

Appropriate Courses

English 1A paired with California History or Asian-American History

Bibliographic Information

See, Lisa. *On Gold Mountain.* New York: Vintage Books, 1995.

ISBN 0-679-76852-1

Memoir: 378 pages, 21 chapters

"Pa" from *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers* By Loung Ung

Plot Overview

Loung Ung was eight years old when she lost several family members during Pol Pot's regime in Cambodia. This is a straightforward, stark retelling of the "disappearing" of her father and of the effects of that disappearance on family members, as they face hunger and loss and as her (white) mother grows in strength as she works to help her family survive.

Commentary

Knowing that Loung Ung ultimately lost both parents and two siblings to the Khmer Rouge makes this narrative all the more heartbreaking. This reading would be useful for the historical context it offers of the Pol Pot regime, Students

working on narrative, on writing and punctuating quotations, or on memoir would also appreciate this piece.

Appropriate Courses

English 67

Bibliographic Information

Ung, Loung. "Pa" from *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers.* ." In *Bold Words: A Century of Asia American Writing.* Eds. Rajini Srikanth and Ester Y. Iwanaga. USA: Rutgers University Press, 2001. Pp. 59-66.

ISBN 0-8135-2966-2

Excerpt from a book-length memoir: 8 pages

Excerpt from *My Own Country: A Doctor's Story of a Town and its People in the Age of AIDS* by Abraham Verghese

Plot Overview

Abraham Verghese, who was born in Ethiopia to Indian parents, tells here of the ramifications of his work with AIDS patients at a VA hospital in Tennessee. In this narrative, a patient with AIDS is unwillingly "outed" by a pharmacist who is concerned when the patient has a tooth pulled by a local dentist without informing the dentist that he is HIV positive. The memoir examines Verghese's interactions with the pharmacist, the patient, and with his own wife, who feels frustrated at the amount of time he dedicates to his practice. Ultimately, the piece reflects on isolation and alienation brought on by a complex web of race, fear of AIDS, and tensions within a marriage and a community.

Commentary

This is a clearly written, unsentimental excerpt that would be accessible to a range of levels. It raises interesting questions about ethics: is the pharmacist's decision to call the dentist wrong or right? What about the patient and his failure to disclose his HIV status? What do we do with the fact that the patient had been turned away by nine dentists when he did disclose his status? What are Dr. Verghese's obligations to his family? To his patients? To the community?

Appropriate Courses

English 68 (paired with Nursing), English 1A

Bibliographic Information

Verghese, Abraham. Excerpt from *My Own Country: A Doctor's Story of a Town and its People in the Age of AIDS.* ." In *Bold Words: A Century of Asia American Writing.* Eds. Rajini Srikanth and Ester Y. Iwanaga. USA: Rutgers University Press, 2001. Pp. 38-45.

ISBN 0-8135-2966-2

Excerpt from book-length memoir: 8 pages

FICTION

"Fredo Avila" by Gina Apostol

Plot Overview

Gina Apostol, who won the 1997 Philippine National Book Award for her novel *Bibliolepsy* and who has published short stories in a variety of sources, has crafted in this short story a winsome combination of pathos and humor. It is a story about dreams: the narrator wants to study in Manila in Letran or San Beda, "like [his] uncle, the mayor, who had flunked both schools"; his friend Spinoza "Chong" Botictic wants to meet Jaworski, the basketball player; and, at the center of the story, Fredo Avila, the town boxer, wants to travel to Beverly Hills and be a contestant on "The Price is Right." And while Fredo would like to win the biggest of prizes, it is really victory of any sort that he desires. When asked what he would do if he won a bathtub, as an earlier contestant had done, Fredo is quick to reply: he'd put it in his backyard, hire someone to fetch water for him, and sit in splendor, dressed in his jockeys, in "his free, glistening bathtub in the open, Filipino air" (226). The story follows the path of these modest dreams; the dreams of the town, particularly the narrator, parallel the path of the dreams of Fredo Avila, who vies, failing, in contests until the very end.

Commentary

I love this story for its humor, its sharp, ironic vision, and for its crafting. I will be using it in my English 67 class, which will focus on journeys and change, though it would work for English 68, too. Discussion questions useful for the story might include these:

1) Fredo is a man of few words, but he has several significant lines in the story. What do you think these lines suggest about him and what happens to him in the story?

   "He's entitled to his ambition…That's what he has" (227).

   "Another dead end" (228).

   "Danny, did you know there is dust in America?" (234)

   "Boxer, sir, from the Philippines, sir!" (235)

2) How does Fredo's news that he has been chosen to go on "Price is Right" affect the town? What "flagrant hopes and declared dreams" emerge? (228) Why do you think that this happens?

3) Look for mentions of dust in the story; underline them. As you pull them all together, what is their significance? What do they suggest?

4) How does Fredo's appearance on the show affect him? Why?

5) At the end of the story, the narrator is sick. Why? What do you make of Eusebia the quack's comments at the close of the story?

Appropriate Courses

English 67, 68, 1A

Bibliographic Information

Apostol, Gina, "Fredo Avila." In *Bold Words: A Century of Asia American Writing*. Eds. Rajini Srikanth and Ester Y. Iwanaga. USA: Rutgers University Press, 2001.

Short story: 9 pages.

The Inheritance of Loss by Kiran Desai

Plot Summary

This novel, winner of the Man Booker Prize for 2006, most assuredly fits its title. It is a detailed, vivid rendering of two worlds, with most of the action taking place in an isolated house and village in the Himalayas, with occasional shifts to the foul apartments and back kitchens of the nearly invisible immigrants who have come to make a new life for themselves in New York City. We see things primarily through the experiences of Sai, the young granddaughter of an embittered Anglophile judge who lives in isolation at the foot of Mount Kanchenjunga and through the experiences of Biju, the son of the judge's cook

who, in what they all think is an enormous stroke of luck, has been able to emigrate to America. What ties these two worlds and two characters together is their inheritance of loss. The string of these losses is inexorable as we witness the profound cost of overt colonialism in India and of the more subtle variations within America. Yet, despite the sometimes relentless sense of loss, the book does not mire in despair. There is no Hollywood ending possible here, but the humanity of the characters made me grateful. The novel evokes a line from Borges which serves as the epigraph for the book: "My humanity is in feeling that we are all voices of the same poverty."

Commentary

This is a really wonderful book, one of those that I read in a kind of swoon as it so effectively rendered a world for me. It is overwhelming, though, in its unblinking look at the ways in which dreams falter and die—the judge, who dreamed of Western success and assimilation, the cook, who dreams of wealth and success for his son, Sai, who dreams of love, and Biju, who dreams of re-creating his life in the New World. It's also long, probably too long for most of our classes, though perhaps it would work in a 1B or an honors class. It does such an amazing job of presenting the world of the back kitchen workers that it might work (at any level) to have students read just those chapters on Biju's life as he scrambles from kitchen job to job and apartment to apartment; chapters 3, 5, 10, 14, and 17, for example, would make a unit in themselves. A Reading Group Guide is included in the book.

Appropriate Courses

English 1B/Honors, excerpts in 67, 68, 1A

Bibliographic Information

Desai, Kiran. *The Inheritance of Loss.* New York: Grove Press, 2006.

ISBN 0-8021-4281-8

Novel: 357 pages, plus a Reading Guide with questions

Monkey Bridge by Lan Cao

Plot Summary

This novel, written by Vietnamese American Lan Cao, is grounded in the metaphor of its title: a monkey bridge, a spindly bamboo construction designed for crossing from one place to another, a bridge that requires dexterity and flexibility, a bridge that is dangerous and that will always throw the crosser off balance. Such is the crossing of the young woman narrator, Mai, who is navigating between the world of her past, Vietnam, and the world of her present and future, the United States. Her crossing is complicated, as is so often the case, by her mother's entrenchment in her past and in her own culture. In her efforts to ease her mother's sorrow at having left Mai's grandfather back in Vietnam during the evacuation, Mai works to find ways to find him and bring him to the United

States. This dream is complicated by a series of secrets that her mother has never revealed, secrets that Mai must solve on her own, even as she grapples with the issues more ordinary for a girl her age—her desire to leave home to go to college. How can she cross the "monkey bridge" of her life without falling?

Commentary

This is a book that I've read and re-read with pleasure. Its evocation of Vietnam is beautiful, as is her rendering of the complicated dynamic between the mother and the daughter who must translate the American way of life for her. I've used this novel several times in English 68, with good results. Students at that level do need, however, what the reading folks call "scaffolding," that is, background knowledge and guidance without which the book can be difficult for them. First, they have very little knowledge (read: almost none) of the Vietnam War. Our Media Services Department has an excellent short video that provides an overview of the war that is quite useful, especially if students are given questions/material to watch for during viewing. The novel also does a lot of moving back and forth in time and place, from the United States of the present to the Vietnam of the past, and inexperienced readers can use some help on that. Despite these two caveats, I'd highly recommend this book; I had one student (a Latina) tell me that, in terms of the cultural balancing act that it portrays, she'd seen her own life in its pages.

Appropriate Courses

English 68, 1A, 1B

Bibliographic Information

Cao, Lan. *Monkey Bridge*. New York: Penguin Books, 1997.

ISBN 0-14-026361-6

Novel: 260 pages, 13 chapters

“Railroad Standard Time” by Frank Chin

Plot Overview

Author Frank Chin is a formidable name in Asian American Literature, as he co-edited the first major Asian-American Anthology, *Aiiieeeee!* in 1974 and has written many novels, short stories, plays, and essays in addition to co-editing a second anthology, *The Big Aiiieeeee!* This story asserts, however, his desire to distance himself from the canon, as he says, “I hate my book now that Ma’s dead....I know she’s not the woman I wrote up like my mother, and dead, in a book that was like everybody else’s Chinatown book. Part word map of Chinatown San Francisco, shop to shop down Grant Avenue. Food again. The wind sucks the shops out and you breathe warm roast ducks dripping fat, hooks into the neck, through the head, out an eye” (187). This story is less a story than a rumination, a riff, an improvisation that is rooted in the gift of a grandfather’s watch; it is a narration that moves in a stream of consciousness, as the narrator

begins by remembering places and times where he wore the watch, then veers off in different directions, coming back at the end to the watch and the railroad, that inescapable icon of Chinese American history.

Commentary

This is a complex, elegiac short story that satisfies more and more with re-reading, an echo of Kerouac as he says, "I've been on the road for sixteen hours straight down the music of Seattle, Spokane, Salt Lake, Sacramento, Los Angeles, and Wolfman Jack lurking in odd hours of darkness, at peculiar altitudes of darkness, favoring the depths of certain Oregon valleys and heat and moonlight of my miles. And I'm still alive" (188). This story would be most useful, I suspect, in a creative writing course, in which students could attempt something similar—taking a concrete object (as he does with this watch) and then exploring the directions in which their memories and their associations with that object take them.

Appropriate Courses

Creative Writing—Fiction or Poetry

Bibliographic Information

Chin, Frank. "Railroad Standard Time." In *Bold Words: A Century of Asia American Writing*. Eds. Rajini Srikanth and Ester Y. Iwanaga. USA: Rutgers University Press, 2001. Pp. 185-189.

Short story: 4 pages

The Dim Sum of All Things by Kim Wong Keltner

Plot Overview

In Kim Wong Keltner's light-hearted and funny novel, we see the travails and everyday adventures of "wage slave" twenty-something Lindsey, who in a Bridget Jonesesque narrative, tells of her search for love as she tries to avoid "Hoarders," those beige-clad, nebbish white men who exoticize Asian women and as she copes with blind dates with the grandsons of her grandmother's mahjong partners. This search for love is complicated somewhat by the fact that she lives with her grandmother, whose penchant for preparing malodorous Chinese ointments puts a cramp in Lindsey's romantic life.

Commentary

This book was such a relief after all the bleak and tragic books that have been part of my reading for this project: so much suffering, especially for women who faced foot binding, rejection because they were daughters, the shame of having their husbands marry second (and third and fourth) wives, and the pain of the marginalized life of immigrants. Filled with laugh-out-loud moments, this

"chic-lit" novel is a treat. And though it is breezy and humorous, it addresses some of the issues that we see in other more somber texts. It would pair nicely, I think, with Michele Serros' *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*, which has a similarly humorous take on some of the same serious issues raised by being a part of a minority culture.

Appropriate Courses

English 1A, Images of Women in Literature

Bibliographic Information

Keltner, Kim Wong. *The Dim Sum of All Things.* USA: Avon Trade, 2004.

ISBN 0-06-056075-4

Novel: 344 pages

Native Speaker by Chang-Rae Lee

Plot Summary

In this winner of the Hemingway Foundation Pen Award, we see Korean-American Henry Park face the tenuousness of all things. This is a book about fragility and the possibility of loss—and what we can do in its aftermath. The book begins with one of the best opening lines I've read in modern fiction: "The day my wife left she gave me a list of who I was." And that is the central question with which Henry Park grapples: who is he? But that question, so familiar in immigrant literature (maybe in all literature), is explored in a plot that is remarkable in its unexpected turns and inventiveness. In short, Henry must deal with his grief about the loss of his young son, his wife's grief and their faltering marriage, and his job—a job in which he serves as a mole, a "spook," prying into the lives of his "targets," most often with the aim of finding damning

things to be used against them by those who have hired him. The complication arises when he finds himself unable to detach from his subjects, most especially John Kwang, a Korean-American politician who seems to have achieved the American Dream and who seems sincere in his desire to share that dream with the disenfranchised.

Commentary

Read this book! No, really, read it. While it is certainly teachable and would be a powerful part of a literature course's curriculum, I recommend it simply as a splendid, splendid book. It is often compared to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and with good reason. Henry Park is indeed invisible, both because he is an immigrant and because he has discovered the usefulness and power of invisibility. But beyond that, it is lyrical, interestingly plotted, and enormously rich in theme and symbol. This book is a reader's dream.

Appropriate Courses

English 1B, American Literature 2

Bibliographic Information

Lee, Chang-Rae. *Native Speaker*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1995.

ISBN 1-57322-531-2

Novel: 349 pages

“Pangs of Love” by David Wong Louie

Plot Summary

This short story is a striking combination of familiar themes and quirky, imaginative plot turns. The protagonist/narrator is a thirty-five-year-old son who is caught in the throes of filial obligations: his siblings have “convened a secret meeting” and “unanimously elected [him] as [their] mother’s new apartment mate” (75). They face familiar tensions: she wants him and his brother to marry, she worries about his finances, they struggle with language barriers and generational differences. But Louie brings to these now-familiar themes a wonderful sense of humor and imagination: his narrator works at a “corporation that manufactures synthetic flavors and fragrances” whose mission it is “to make the chemical world, an otherwise noxious, foul-tasting, polysyllabic ocean of consumer dread, a cozier place for the deserving noses and tastebuds of America” (76). The story follows the narrator and his mother on a trip to visit his brother Billy, and we see the mother’s mounting anxiety as she enters a world she doesn’t fully understand, for Billy is clearly (to everyone else) gay and thus impervious to her anxious offers to arrange a trip to Hong Kong in search of a bride for him. She retreats to an upper room to watch wrestling, with its much clearer

delineation of good and bad, righteous and evil, and the narrator, in his first moment of real empathy for her, longs to make everything all right.

Commentary

I loved this story, reading it again and again for its humor and pathos; I was reminded of some of T. Corraghessan Boyle's best stories in which he doesn't let his sardonic wit obscure the humanity of his characters and their situations. Students would enjoy it, too, though students at the 1A level might need some help in probing the symbolism of the narrator's job and its place in the story. I look forward to reading more of his work, especially (on a personal note) since he and I used to ride a bus together from Santa Cruz to Berkeley to teach freshman composition classes there. It's lovely to see that he has "made good" and found a way to pursue his writing and to do it so well.

Appropriate Courses

English 1A, 1B, Multicultural Literature

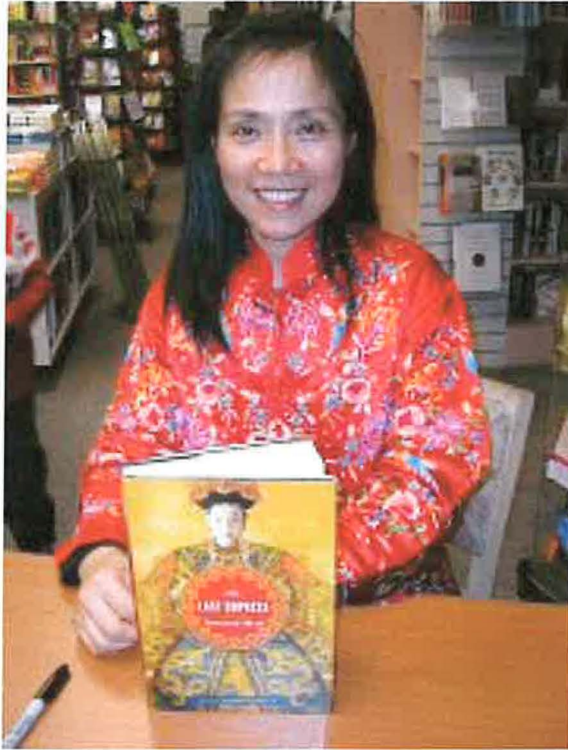
Bibliographic Information

Louie, David Wong. *Pangs of Love*. New York: Penguin Publishing, 1992.
Pp. 75-99.

ISBN 0-452-26888-5

Short story within a collection of stories, 26 pages

Empress Orchid by Anchee Min



Plot Overview

This national bestseller is another of the texts that deals not with Asian American experience but that instead is set firmly in the distance—in mid- to late-nineteenth century China, during a time of great change, with Western powers slowly encroaching on China's sovereignty and unrest throughout the rural population. This historical novel tells the story of Orchid, a poverty-stricken young woman who rises to enormous power, entering as one of many low-level concubines for the emperor and gradually becoming the most powerful woman in China—its last empress, who ruled for over forty years. The novel is based on the real woman Tzu Hsi, whom history has painted as manipulative and evil, a villainous figure of intrigue. But Min, having researched for years, even taking

documents from the Forbidden City, presents a more sympathetic portrayal of a bright, strong-willed survivor who sought to help her weak-willed husband to rule a vast country that was unraveling, and upon his death, to maintain order in the face of plots and counterplots that promised chaos.

Commentary

My early reading of *Aiiieeeee!* made me feel a little guilty for liking this book so much. Was I guilty, I wondered, of being seduced by the exoticism of books like this and those by Lisa See, preferring the long-ago-and-far-away aspect to the more emotionally difficult truths of the problems faced by immigrants or—as some of the writers in *Charlie Chan is Dead* would argue—to the everyday issues faced by Asian Americans defined not so much by their race as by their class, their gender, their sexual orientation? I don't know. The fact is, I loved this book, as it took me to a world I had heard about, The Forbidden City, but had no knowledge of. It is a stunningly different world, and young Orchid is a worthy though not idealized heroine. I found myself thinking about the Greek myths I teach in which the goddesses are inevitably described as wily and mischievous. This book makes clear that those who are officially and vehemently denied power will and must find other ways to exert themselves, and this Orchid does in an amazing way. I look forward to reading Min's related text, *Becoming Madame Mao*, and her memoir, *Red Azalea*.

Appropriate Courses

Images of Women in Literature

Bibliographic Information

Min, Anchee. *Empress Orchid.* New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004.

ISBN 0-618-56203-6

Novel: 336 pages.

Bone by Fae Myenne Ng

Plot Summary

This book, a debut novel by Fae Myenne Ng, is a really lovely book about the Leong family in San Francisco's Chinatown. The narrator is Leila, the eldest of three sisters, daughters of Dulcie (Mah) and Leon, who are estranged but inextricably connected, in part by the loss of Ona, the middle daughter. We learn on the first page of the book that Ona has died, when Leila says off-handedly, "Mah and Leon are still married, but after Ona jumped off the Nam, Leon moved out. It was a bad time." The mystery of that jump—when and how and why Ona committed suicide—is the thread that pulls the novel together and is the primary source of the tension that makes the book so engaging. The unraveling of the mystery--and of the family and its secrets--addresses issues that are both particular to the Chinese immigrant and to us all.

Commentary

This is an artful book, with straightforward language and a poetic style, as we hear when Leila says,

> "I believe that the secrets we hold in our hearts are our anchors, that even the unspoken between us is a measure of our every promise to the living and to the dead. And all our promises, like all our hopes, move us through life with the power of an ocean liner pushing through the sea." (193)

The challenge of this text for students would be the shifting in time, the movement back and forth between the present and past. Students, particularly in 68, might need some help or preparation for those shifts in time.

One of the central questions/issues raised by the book lies in the character of the narrator, Leila, whose job is "being the bridge between the classroom and the parents" (16). This job acts as a metaphor for her position of being caught between her own parents, between the insular world of her Chinatown neighborhood and the outer world, between her Asian and her American self. Discussions and assignments could examine the ways in which she is straddling two worlds and at what cost.

Appropriate Courses

English 68, 1A

Bibliographic Information

Ng, Fae Myenne. *Bone*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1993.

ISBN 0-06-097592-X

Novel: 194 pages, 12 chapters

A Single Shard by Linda Sue Park

Plot Summary

Written by Linda Sue Park, a Korean American raised in Illinois, this Newberry Award-winning book tells the story of a young boy in twelfth-century Korea as he tries to make a place for himself in the world. In the narrative, young Tree-Ear (so named because as an orphan, he—like a tree-ear mushroom that grows from rotted tree trunks, not seed—has no parents and no family) lives in obscurity and poverty, homeless except for a spot that he shares under a bridge with an old man who is also without a family. The story focuses on Tree Ear's work for a master potter who makes Celadon pottery and who hopes to receive a commission for his work from the royal court. Ultimately, Tree Ear must make a long journey by foot to the royal palace in order to show the work of his elderly master. Author Park says that the book has three basic threads: "pottery, family, and journey." It also has threads of poverty and friendship and class, all of which weave together to make a compelling and moving story.

Commentary

I had some hesitation about this text, designated as it is as a "children's book," highlighted by its having been awarded the John Newberry Medal; the website says that it is appropriate for children from 9-14. In fact, I found it a powerful book, simply but well told, with themes and issues appropriate for our students. I like its empathetic treatment of a homeless protagonist, and his orphan state is particularly poignant in a culture that grounds identity in one's family and class position. I liked, too, that it focuses on art and a young man's desire to pursue that art. I found myself imagining taking students to see our ceramics department at Mt. SAC or to the Asian-Pacific Museum in Pasadena, which has an extensive collection of ceramics. There is an excellent accompanying website (www.lindasuepark.com) that includes background information, pictures of the pottery being described, and geographical information that provides a context for Tree Ear's journey. Students might be interested, too, in examining the ways that the story follows Joseph Campbell's heroic journey motif.

Appropriate Courses

English 67, English 75

Bibliographic Information

Park, Linda Sue. *A Single Shard.* New York: Random House, 2001.

ISBN 0-440-41851-8

Novel: 148 pages, 13 chapters, plus an essay and an interview with author

"Immigration Blues": *Excerpt from The Man Who (Thought He) Looked like Robert Taylor* by Bienvenido Santos

Plot Overview

Bienvenido Santos is "one of the most important, beloved, and widely read writers in the Philippines," according to Jessica Hagedorn, and this excerpt demonstrates why that is so. In this story, we get a sympathetic and humorous look at Alipio, a Filipino widower, whose life has "gone to pieces" in San Francisco after his wife died. The story shows an encounter in which two women visit him and it gradually emerges that one of them needs a visa and is offering herself as wife to him—just as, we discover as the story closes, his wife Seniang had done years before.

Commentary

This is not an action-packed story; its charms lie in the character development we see through the awkward conversation that we witness—with Alipio clueless about the women's purpose in visiting, Mrs. Zafra strong in her determination to take care of her sister's problem, and Monica timid and mortified about her position. The story brings to

life the circumstances faced by immigrants, particularly male Asian immigrants who (in a country that talks endlessly about "family values") were forbidden by law from bringing their wives and families with them to the United States and who were also forbidden to marry Caucasian women, a situation that doomed them to solitary lives. This would be an excellent reading in a class looking at American history, particularly the history of the American West.

Appropriate Courses

English 68, 1A, courses linked with American History/Asian American History

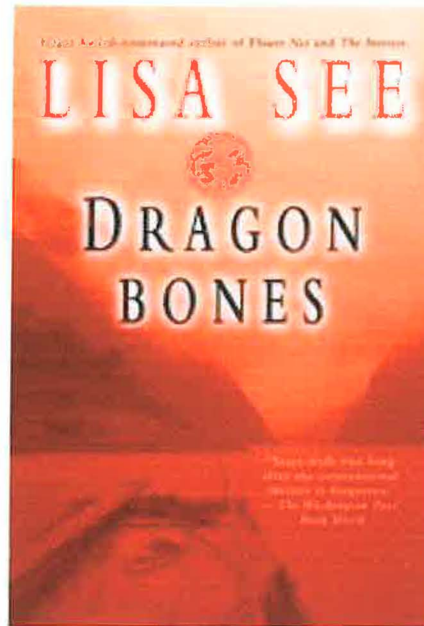
Bibliographic Information

Santos, Bienvenido. "Immigration Blues" from *The Man Who (Thought He) Looked Like Robert Taylor*. In *Charlie Chan is Dead: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction.* Ed. Jessica Hagedorn. New York: Penguin Books, 1993. Pp. 422-439.

ISBN 0-14-023111-0

Excerpt from novel: 18 pages

Dragon Bones by Lisa See



Plot Overview

This work of detective fiction, the third in a series by Lisa See featuring Liu Hulan and her husband David Stark, is embedded in See's usual rich historical context. Here, the context is the world of antiquities—their discovery, their acquisition, their sales, all set within the larger context of the proposed damming of the Three Gorges region of China. As Liu Hulan, an inspector in China's Ministry of Public Security, seeks to solve the murders of an archaeologist, we see her struggle with her grief over the death of her child and with the widening rift in her marriage to her American husband. In addition to its examination of a marriage that is faltering on the shoals of grief, the book is a contemplation of the nature of monuments and their significance to the nations that build them—both what those monuments mean to the builder nation and what they say to others about that nation.

Commentary

For me, this work is not as compelling as See's other works, partly because of the plot convolutions that are part of any mystery novel, and partly because the central characters don't seem fully accessible. We see the events from their two viewpoints in alternating chapters, but I was not persuaded that I knew or understood either of them in any real way. The book is more interesting for the historical and sociological insights it offers about a China in flux than it is as a mystery or an examination of relationships.

Appropriate Courses

English 1A, Introduction to Detective Fiction

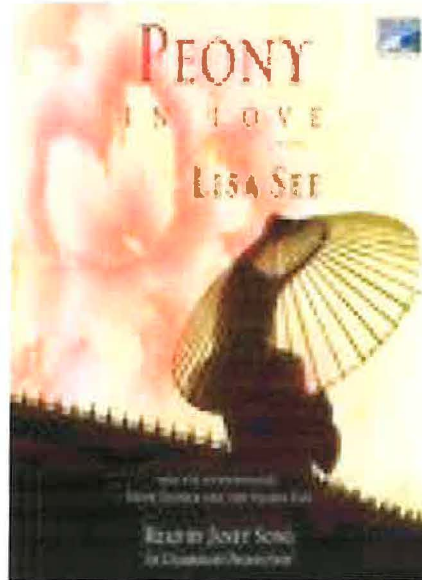
Bibliographic Information

See, Lisa. *Dragon Bones.* New York: Ballantine Books, 1973.

ISBN 0-345-44031-5

Novel: 343 pages, 27 chapters, plus an epilogue and an author's note

Peony in Love by Lisa See



Plot Overview

This newest novel by Lisa See combines a number of her strengths: it is grounded in a fascinating but little known historical truth from China, it examines relationships between women, and it explores the ways in which those women seek to have voices, to be heard, in a culture that forbids them that right. Set in 17th century China, the novel follows the effects of an opera, *The Peony Pavilion*, on a young girl, Peony, who is the sheltered daughter of a family of privilege and wealth. Peony, like the heroine in the opera, succumbs to the "lovesick maiden syndrome," an illness which did, in fact, take the lives of many young women of the time. The book follows her after death, offering insights into the Chinese view of the afterlife, with its complex system of levels, protocols, and rituals. While the book is about the connections between the dead

and the living, it is also about the desire of women to have a voice, to read and to write, to be authors not only of their own texts but also of their own lives.

Commentary

This is a fascinating book, in part simply for the knowledge it offers about the complexities of the views of the afterlife held in traditional Chinese culture. A number of things that had been alluded to in other texts were made clear to me in reading this novel. It is fascinating, too, in its telling of a story based on truth of a time when Chinese women were allowed to travel, to write, to express themselves in ways unthinkable in the times when they were relegated to the inner rooms of their homes. Lisa See, in her Author's Note, puts it this way:

> In the mid-seventeenth century, more women writers were being published in China's Yangzi delta than in all the rest of the world at that time. By that I mean there were *thousands* of women—bound-footed, often living in seclusion, from wealthy families—who were being published. (275)

This book seeks to tell their story through Peony's story, both as a living young woman who studies and comments upon *The Peony Pavilion* in its margins and as a ghost who interacts with the women writers who preceded her in death and who followed in her footsteps. The book required some effort for me in the suspension of disbelief: it was hard to fully engage in the descriptions of Peony's actions as a ghost. But in spite of that, the book is engrossing and interesting, a confirmation of the importance of language and literacy as avenues by which a self can be asserted.

I am uncertain about using this text in a class, though I can imagine its use in an Images of Women course. I would, however, recommend it to anyone

teaching Chinese American literature as a primer text in understanding the views and rituals of the afterlife which are referenced but not fully explained in so many Chinese American texts. In addition, it would be a great text for courses considering the connection of written language to power, particularly for women in patriarchal cultures.

Appropriate Courses

Images of Women in Literature, Multicultural Literature

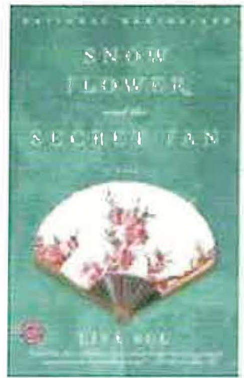
Bibliographic Information

See, Lisa. *Peony in Love*. Random House: New York, 2007.

ISBN 978-I-40000-6466-3

Novel: 284 pages.

Snow Flower and the Secret Fan by Lisa See



Plot Overview

The introduction to the anthology *Bold Words* asserts that in recent years, Asian American literature has generally been divided into two areas: works that are centered primarily in the United States and works that include "ancestral homelands and diasporic locations outside of the United States" (xx). This amazing novel by American-born Lisa See takes us back into ancestral homelands, entering us fully into an unfamiliar world—the "upstairs world" of Chinese women in the past, a traditional world that included foot binding, the ritual relationship between "laotongs," two women who were bound in friendship from an early age in a relationship more powerful and enduring than marriage, and the practice of *nu shu*, a special and centuries-old secret written language created by and practiced solely by women for women. See enters and recreates this world in a very vivid way, achieving a non-judgmental voice as she tells us this amazing story in the voice of an old woman, Lily, who has outlived most of her family, including her beloved Snow Flower, her laotong.

Commentary

See's book re-creates this far away world so vividly that I listened to it on a CD as well as reading it. The descriptions of foot binding are horrific; I can look back with new

eyes at the tiny slippers I saw at the Asian Pacific Museum early in my sabbatical. But the interesting thing for me is the way that See is able to capture the mindset of the time and place in ways that led me to understand—a little—how such a practice came to be inflicted on daughters by mothers. The book also offers insights into the comfort offered by a system in which men and women are separated, offered different spaces in which to interact. It's a system that made women dependent, make no mistake, but it offered ritualized opportunities for women's friendship that I think contemporary American women long for and seek in the venues of their book clubs and their women's organizations. This book would elicit interesting discussions and debates in a 1B level setting.

Appropriate Courses

English 1B, Images of Women in Literature

Bibliographic Information

See, Lisa. *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan.* Random House Audio Books.

ISBN 0-7393-3467-0

Audiobook/novel: 5 hours, 4 CDs, including an exclusive essay read by the author

The Bonesetter's Daughter by Amy Tan

Plot Overview

This novel, written in two parts, has themes familiar to those in *Joy Luck Club*: tensions between mothers and daughters, the failure of communication, the cost of silence. But for me, particularly in its first section, it rivals and perhaps surpasses *Joy Luck*. Tan presents in Ruth Young a vivid and uncomfortably familiar image of "the good girl"—the obedient daughter, the accommodating wife and mother—who must ultimately grapple with the question of who she is and what she wants. Tan does a masterful job of underscoring Ruth's voicelessness in a number of ways. In the second half of the book, the narration is taken up by Ruth's mother, who tells a gripping story of her life in China, full of secrets and pain that must ultimately be faced—through speaking, through writing, through the breaking of silence.

Commentary

I would definitely use this book for teaching, as it lends itself to reading and analysis in a way that would be accessible and interesting to our students. It is constructed in such a way (sort of like the Steinbeck story "The Chrysanthemums") that it would act as a primer for students new to close readings, critical thinking, and the use of symbol to underscore meaning in a text. Our students, particularly young women, would relate to the difficulties that come with being a "good girl" that both Ruth and her mother face, even at two very different times on two very different continents. Amy Tan has an interesting website, and there are several reader's guides and book club discussions available on the internet. For more information, see the casebook at the end of this project.

Appropriate Courses

English 1B, Images of Women in Literature, Multicultural Literature, American Lit 2

Bibliographic Information

Tan, Amy. *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2001.

ISBN 0-8041-1498-6

Novel: 403 pages.

"Seventeen Syllables" by Hisaye Yamamoto

Plot Overview

Hisaye Yamamoto, this story's author, was born in California in 1923, was later interned in Arizona during World War II, and worked as a reporter and columnist. Her upbringing in the American West and her reporter's eye are evident in this story, which is set in a farming community near Los Angeles, where the Hayashi family—young Rosie, her mother, and her father—live and work in the tomato fields. Rosie's mother becomes engrossed in writing haiku, both for pleasure and for publication in Japanese newspapers, and the story arc follows the tension that arises when Rosie's uneducated father grows increasingly resentful of his wife's involvement with her poetry, a disenchantment that is juxtaposed with Rosie's increasing infatuation with a young man who works in the fields with them.

Commentary

Written in the third person, this is a story about isolation and longing; interestingly, the isolation is not, as is sometimes the case, an isolation brought on by "outsider" status; instead, that isolation is brought on by diverging needs and interests. It

is well-written and compelling and would be of interest to our students, who could look at the issues of isolation, distances within families, at instances of finding (and losing) one's voice, and at Rosie's "coming of age."

Appropriate Courses

English 67 (towards the middle or end of the course), 68, 1A, 1B

Bibliographic Information

Yamamoto, Hisaye. "Seventeen Syllables." In *Bold Words: A Century of Asian American Writing*. Eds. Rajini Srikanth and Ester Y. Iwanaga. USA: Rutgers University Press, 2001. Pp. 154-163.

Short story: 10 pages

POETRY

The range of Asian American poetry is staggering, with a wide range of topics, themes, and forms. Listed below are ten of the poems that interested me most and that would be most useful in our classes.

"Thirty Years Under" and "Cincinnati" by Misuye Yamada

These short poems both focus on a remembered moment of racism—of being called a "dirty Jap" and being spat upon in a public street. They could be compared to short works by Langston Hughes and would work at all levels.

"Recipe" by Janice Mirikitani

This short poem is a recipe for "Round eyes." It is clear and stark and would fit into any unit on issues of cultural definitions of female beauty.

"Urban Love Songs: after Tsu Yeh" by Wing Tek Lum

This is a series of sixteen four-line poems that trace the evolution of a relationship—the moment of attraction, the courtship, the moving in together, and the moving out. This is a great exercise in inferential thinking that will be familiar and interesting to students. I plan to use it as an option for a summary writing assignment for English 67.

"Strawberries" by Eric Chock

This is a funny 50-line poem in which the narrator begins like this: "Leave me alone." He then goes on to catalog all of the things he does not want to contemplate as he enjoys eating strawberries—the hardworking immigrant

workers who pick the fruit, the pesticides that made the perfect strawberry possible, the plastic baskets that will never decompose….This poem lays out clearly the "global footprint" that consuming a simple strawberry produces.

"A Conservative View" by Cathy Song

This is an amusing longer (two page) poem by Cathy Song, who was born in Hawaii, in which she writes about her mother's life's philosophy: the conservation of money. This is an accessible, funny poem that would work in any unit on parents and children and the tensions between generations.

"The Founding of Yuba City" by Chitra Divakaruni

This is a moving, two-page poem in which Punjabi railroad workers dream of farms of their own, bought with the money they earned "pounding metal into the earth," unaware that Alien Land Laws would prohibit them for years from owning land of their own. This would be an excellent poem for any unit on immigration.

"The Young of Tiananmen" by Meena Alexander

This is a beautiful one-page tribute poem to the young people who protested and died in Tiananmen Square. It's one of those poems that I think students should read just because it's beautiful; they should know what happened when "young with black silken hair/ unstrapp[ed] fear from their thighs."

"Beetle on a String" by Vince Gotera

This is a childhood memory poem set in Manila in which the narrator remembers entertaining himself by tying a beetle on a string and attaching it to his dresser drawers. In the final stanzas, he understands how terrified the beetle must have been, and he closes with a chilling line: "It makes me shiver now/to wonder what thoughtless boy holds my string?" This would work in any unit that includes childhood memory readings, perhaps especially appropriate for a 67 class.

"Sister Play" by Lan Doung

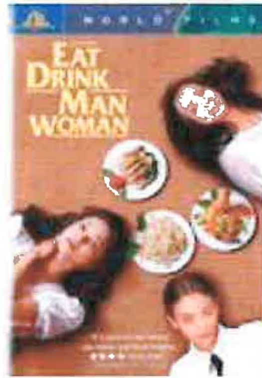
This is a lovely childhood memory poem of 34 lines in which the narrator remembers her relationship with her sisters, with the unifying image being their legs—intertwined as they slept on the floor in their childhood home, hard and muscular as an inheritance from their mother, braced as levers to hold each other up as they played games on a slide in the summer. It would work, like Gotera's poem, in a unit on childhood memories.

"Yellow Light" by Garrett Hongo

This is a one-page poem by the widely respected Garrett Hongo in which he re-creates an evening in which Los Angeles "seethes like a billboard in the twilight." It's a beautiful, evocative poem that follows a woman as she steps off the "hissing bus" at "Olympic and Fig" and walks home to her apartment. It would be interesting to do a unit on life in Los Angeles from a variety of viewpoints and in a variety of genres and to include this poem.

FILMS

Eat Drink Man Woman directed by Ang Lee



Plot Overview

This Ang Lee film exemplifies his incredible sense of the visual, the use of *mise en scene* rather than elaborate camera work in order to establish a sense of place and of character. With similarities to *Babette's Feast* and *Like Water for Chocolate*, food, in its preparation and in its display and in its consumption, plays a central role in the film. The film is, like so many of the works I have read for this project, a story of the complications that arise from the absolute expectation of filial loyalty, in this case the obligations of three daughters to their widowed father, the master chef Chu, who prepares amazingly elaborate dinners for them each Sunday which they must attend, no matter what. There is a strange dissonance between the love implicit in his preparation of these feasts and the profound uneasiness and lack of communication that pervade these Sunday gatherings. The family gathers, but they eat in sullen ways, occasionally squabbling, but mostly eating in silence. The film follows three pivotal moments in which each of the girls must make "announcements" which change the course of their own lives and the lives of their family. The argument of the film, which has a surprise announcement by the chef himself at the end of the movie, is that ultimately love is as necessary as food and drink.

Commentary

This is a charming film that students will like as they follow the life paths of the three daughters—the youngest, who works at a Wendy's, which provides a sharp counterpoint to Master Chu's exquisitely prepared feasts; the shy chemistry teacher who expends all of her emotional energy on her newly found Christian faith; the Westernized businesswoman daughter, whose financial star is on the rise. Students (perhaps Asian and Latina students more than their Anglo counterparts) will understand and empathize with the daughters and their conflicting desires to care for their father and to live their own lives.

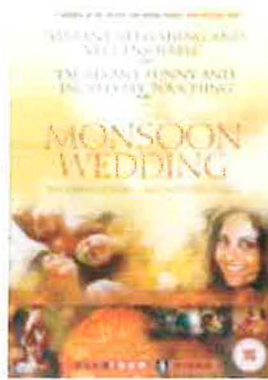
Appropriate Courses

English 68, 1A, 1B

Bibliographic Information

Lee, Ang. *Eat Drink Man Woman.* 1994.

Monsoon Wedding directed by Mira Nair



Plot Overview

Mira Nair says in interviews and in the follow-up clips that she had two central goals for the film: to accomplish it in thirty days on a low budget and to capture the energy, appetite, and generosity of the Punjabi community near Delhi where she grew up. It is a marvelous, sumptuous, visual feast, what Nair calls "a hymn to ostentation." Some critics, such as the critic from the *Village Voice*, disdain the film for its sentimentality and its glossing over of the bleak poverty in India. While these things may be true, it is a lovely, evocative, joyful and poignant film that accomplishes what Nair set out to do. Like *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, to which it is inevitably compared, the action centers around the family dramas that emerge in the days before a wedding, which in Punjabi culture lasts for days. But the film is more ambitious than its Greek counterpart, in part because it weaves together several story lines—five narratives, really, each fraught with its own complexities. In fact, the central narrative—of the young bride-to-be and the groom who has been chosen for her—is ultimately not the most interesting story of the film. Two other strands are even more compelling—of the falling in love of the entrepreneurial wedding planner, played by the incredibly expressive and comic Vijay

Raaz, with the servant Alice, and the exposure (no pun intended) of the pedophiliac uncle who has come from America for the wedding. The story strands are pulled together effectively, and the storms which have been building throughout the story culminate in a spectacular wedding scene in the monsoon of its title.

Commentary

I loved this film and hope to use it in future classes. While students might have difficulty at first tuning their ears to the accents of the characters (as I did), they would enjoy the stories that it presents, and it would offer plentiful topics for discussion. If need be, I could show it with the subtitles to help non-native speakers especially. I have never taught a work involving incest without having at least one student talk to me at some point about her own experiences with sexual abuse; this film would provide that opportunity in a powerful way.

Appropriate Courses

English 68, 1A, Introduction to Cinema

Bibliographic Information

Nair, Mira. *Monsoon Wedding.* 2001.

Chan is Missing directed by Wayne Wang

Plot Overview

Considered a seminal work in Asian American film, *Chan is Missing* follows two taxi drivers, an uncle and nephew, on their search through San Francisco for Chan, a friend who has mysteriously disappeared after they have lent him money. The black and white film, made for $20,000, makes sly and funny allusions to a number of mainstream works on detection. The uncle figure, played marvelously by Wood Moy, is Jo, as in Joe Friday, and he struggles to follow the advice of one faceless informant who suggests that he look for "the facts, just the facts." In a later scene, he and his younger "sidekick" figure, his nephew Steve, played with energy and humor by Marc Hayashi, are told to "look for the woman"—as in the "cherchez la femme," a staple in detective fiction. We are also treated to a visual pun when we see their car parked by itself near the base of the Golden Gate Bridge, a clear allusion to a scene in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* when the befuddled Jimmy Stewart parks in precisely the same spot while he is in search of the mysterious Madeline.

But the film's most significant gift is the way in which Wang turns the stereotypical filmic image of Chinatown on its head. This is not the noirish, exoticized Chinatown of traditional mainstream films. Instead, it is a community, a place where

people live, and those people are a wonderful and varied group—not one "Chinaman" but many. We meet a range of Chinese people, and we are reminded by Steve in one particularly pivotal scene that they "have been here for one hundred years" but are still seen as outsiders. We see Jo, an "ABC" (an American-born Chinese) who, because he is of an older generation, is sometimes at odds with his nephew Steve, who easily slips into American slang (and profanity) and who fought in the Vietnam War; we see a female sociologist, whose jargon leaves Jo and Steve slack-jawed; we meet a cook who trained as an electrical engineer but who now grudgingly makes sweet and sour pork all day and drinks milk to ease his stomach pains. We hear discussions about a range of Chinese political candidates, and we hear a string of terms with which the Chinese community themselves distinguish one another: The ABCs, the PRCs (the People's Republic of China loyalists), and the FOBs—those who are fresh off the boat. It is a lovely array of people, a fine reminder of the tendency of mainstream culture to homogenize and essentialize minorities. We never, however, meet Chan; we learn, as do Jo and Steve, that he is hard to define, a different man to different people: his wife tells us he is "too Chinese," while the cook tells us he was at the top of his engineering class; Steve sees him as FOB, while Jo remembers him as witty and clever. He is not the simple and simplistic Charlie Chan of old films; he is, like the people of Chinatown, elusive not because he is a mysterious "Chinaman" but because he is human and thus complex.

Commentary

I needed to watch this film a couple of times to appreciate fully its artistry and argument. Wang is a master of *mise en scene*, and he has a painterly eye, so the film is marked by carefully framed shots in which the camera lingers for longer than today's

sometimes frenetic camera work does. The pacing is thus slow, but his accomplished use of a cinema verite style, and the actors' remarkable improvisational work come together to make a film that well deserves its wide acclaim. The short *The Making of Chan is Missing* provides interesting interviews with Wood Moy (who played Jo with one of the most expressive faces I've seen on film) and with Marc Hayashi; they and the others interviewed provide an interesting context for the film, placing it in the post-Civil Rights era and in a time of burgeoning artistic expression and theatre arts in the San Francisco Chinese community. I can imagine doing a 1A or 1C on detective fiction, and this would fit beautifully in that class.

Appropriate Courses

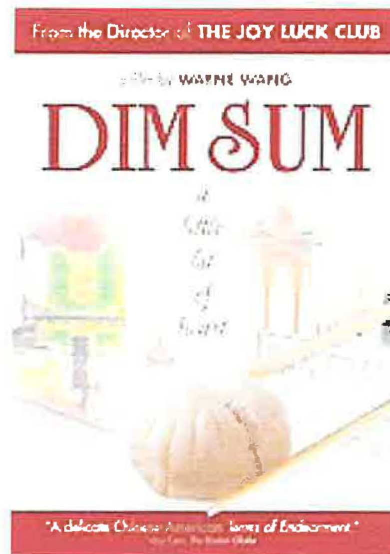
English 1A, 1C, Introduction to Film, Detective Fiction, Multicultural Literature

Bibliographic Information

Wang, Wayne. *Chan is Missing*. 1982.

Black and white film, 80 minutes long. In English with some Cantonese.

Dim Sum directed by Wayne Wang



Plot Overview

This 1985 follow-up to Wayne Wang's *Chan is Missing* is again set in San Francisco's Chinatown. It exhibits some of the trademarks that distinguished that earlier film: its Chinatown setting is vibrant and appealing; its focus is on life in Chinatown, though the scope here is smaller, as the action centers on family dynamics; it exhibits Wang's strong use of *mise en scene*, often in lingering scenic shots; much of the "action" of the film involves conversation, with close-up shots of the actors' faces, cutting back and forth between their faces, which are beautifully expressive.

The plot is simple, revolving around Mrs. Tam, who is just turning 62 and who has been told by a fortune teller that she will die soon. Her daughter Geraldine (played by Laureen Chew, who was also featured in *Chan is Missing*) is in her thirties, is unmarried but happily so; she feels the pressure to be a "good daughter," which in this case would mean getting married to her steady, longtime boyfriend to set her mother's mind at ease

before she dies. Uncle Tam, Mrs. Tam's brother-in-law, also feels that he should take care of Mrs. Tam and offers repeatedly to marry her. The film argues subtly for the power of this seemingly powerless woman: she controls the fate of both her daughter and her brother-in-law not through words or an overt exertion of power; her power lies in their sense of obligation toward her.

Commentary

This film is, as several sources that I read argued, less powerful and edgy than Wang's first piece, but it still has the power to engage and delight. The opening shot—of the open window of Mrs. Tam's sewing room, with curtains blowing in the wind—sets the tone for this lovely, domestic "slice-of-life" film. Victor Wong, who plays Uncle Tam, has been in so many mainstream films as the comedic or villainous Chinaman; it was a pleasure to see him playing a fully developed role. He has considerable gifts as an actor, and I found myself angry to think of the degree to which Hollywood has offered him such a limited range of roles. I'm not sure I'd use this film in class, though it might work in an Images of Women class, raising interesting possibilities for discussion of women's roles and unconventional access to power.

Appropriate Courses

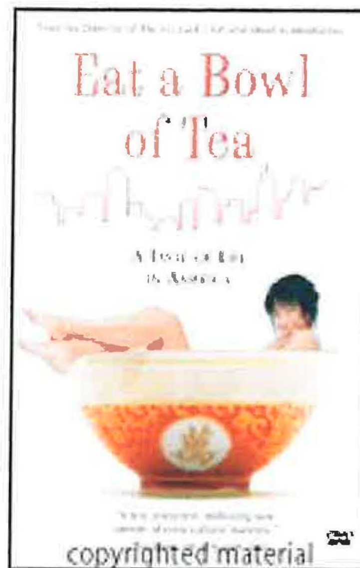
Images of Women in Literature

Bibliographic Information

Wang, Wayne. *Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart*. 1985.

Film in color, 88 minutes.

Eat a Bowl of Tea directed by Wayne Wang



Plot Overview

This film is both comic and serious, light-hearted and sober. While the cover clearly promises a romp, the storyline is rooted in the oppressive legislation that for years kept Asian men from marrying in the United States. As we are told in a voice-over in the beginning, a whole generation of Asian American men were prevented by law from bringing their wives over and from marrying Caucasian women; thus it is an important and festive day when Wah Gay (played beautifully by Victor Wong) can send his son Ben home to China to bring back a wife. The film shows us that trip back to a rural village, Ben's marriage, and the increasing tensions in that marriage when they return to America and he is swept into a job that takes all of his energy and time and is thus perhaps the source of his sexual impotence. The story, based on a novel of the same name by Louis Chu, shows us the spiral of events that result from this situation: his young wife's loneliness, his father's badgering of the young couple to produce

grandchildren, especially a grandson, the community's (mostly male) participation in that pressure, the young wife Mei's infidelity, and the ensuing uproar.

Commentary

While this film is lighter fare and less powerful that *Chan is Missing*, I think that it would be more accessible to our students. One professor commented in his website that this was a favorite among several Asian American films for his students. It deals well with family pressures and the difficulties that can be brought on by close communities and strong culturally based expectations. Clearly, impotence here signifies its word roots: young Ben is without power, and the film shows his ultimate reckoning with that powerlessness. This film would pair nicely with the splendid film *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* in a unit on family relationships and pressures and their outcomes.

I did find myself wondering if this film might be read as a comment from Wayne Wang regarding his art. He has been lambasted in recent years for his shift away from the Chinese-centered art films of his youth; he, like Ben in this film, is expected to meet cultural expectations. Just as Ben is expected to produce "a real family," Wang is expected to produce "real Asian American films." I wonder if Ben's line that "Maybe this is just between Mei and me" might have presaged Wang's own feelings about his art.

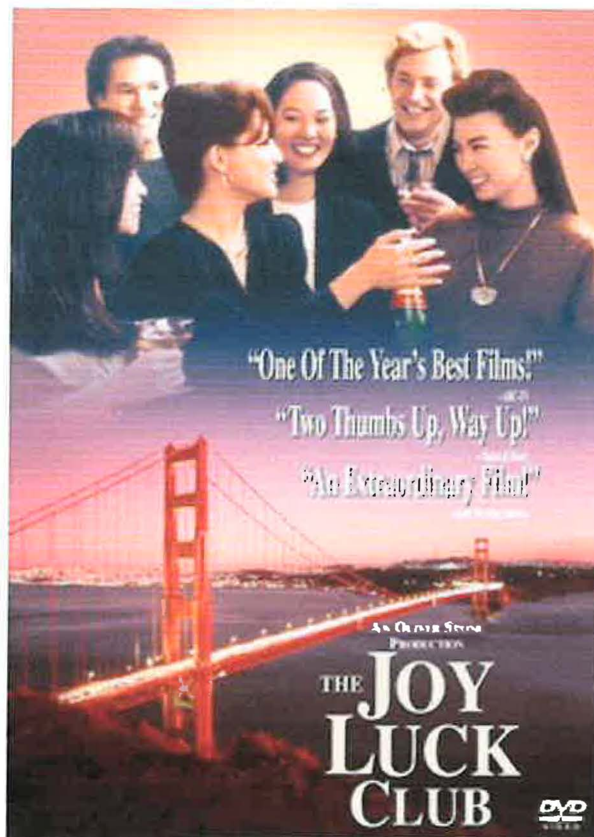
Appropriate Courses

English 68, 1A, 1B. Multicultural Literature

Bibliographic Information

Wang, Wayne. *Eat a Bowl of Tea.* 1989.

The Joy Luck Club directed by Wayne Wang



Plot Overview

Amy Tan's novel of the intertwining stories of four Chinese mothers and their American-born daughters was a major phenomenon at the time of its publication, and by most accounts, Wayne Wang's filmic adaptation does a powerful job of taking the various narratives of the novel and putting them on screen. The film gives us a glowing picture of the stories of these mah-jongg-playing "aunties" and their secret pasts, their dreams for their daughters, and their difficult relationships with those much-loved daughters. We see again Wang's beloved San Francisco, but this contemporary tale moves beyond the confines of Chinatown to the beautiful suburbs of the Bay Area.

Though the film focuses on its cast of mostly Chinese characters, ultimately it strikes a universal chord in the ways in which families, perhaps particularly mothers and daughters, struggle to communicate and to meet each other's hopes and expectations. Although the mothers' secrets—which we see in flashbacks to their lives in pre-revolution China—are particular to that place, time, and culture, the film's themes are like a stone thrown in a pond, showing us the struggles and courage of women in an oppressive traditional culture, expanding to the struggles of immigrant mothers whose assimilated children do not understand them, to the universally familiar tensions between generations.

Commentary

In spite of some critics' complaints about the film—that it is sentimental, that it is "too beautiful, too sumptuous," that it oversimplifies Tan's book, I found the film a pleasure that captures nicely the tensions between the daughters and their mothers and the difficulties of the memories with which each of the mothers must grapple. I have taught the book once; students loved it but struggled a bit with its heavy use of Chinese folktales (tales which some Chinese readers criticize as being inaccurately rendered). Wang's film eliminates almost all of those tales so that the action of the film moves along well. While this film is less experimental and visually interesting than *Chan is Missing*, it would be more accessible to a wider range of students. This would be an excellent choice for viewing and discussion in several levels of our classes. Students understandably like to have some choice about writing topics; this film would allow them to write about the mother/daughter pair of their choice or to compare/contrast two characters or relationships of their choice.

Appropriate Courses

English 68, 1A, 1B, American Lit 2, Multicultural Literature, Images of Women in Lit

Bibliographic Information

Wang. Wayne. *The Joy Luck Club*. 1993.

Film: In color. 2 hours, 19 minutes

CASEBOOKS:

TAKING A CLOSER LOOK

Casebook: Ang Lee

Background

Ang Lee, one of the most successful filmmakers today, was born in Taiwan in 1954 and was raised there, graduating from the National Taiwan College of Arts in 1975. It's interesting to note that, unlike many of the writers and directors examined in this project, Lee immigrated to the United States not as a child but as a young adult, completing his B.F.A. Degree at the University of Illinois and his Masters Degree at New York University, where he worked as an assistant director on Spike Lee's student film. He says of his upbringing, "I don't know where I am, but I never know where I am. I was born in China, then my parents moved to Taiwan, where we were outsiders, then to the States, then back to China, then back here. I trust the elusive world created by movies more than anything else. I live on the other side of the screen." He has gone on to produce an impressive range of films, garnering a number of awards and Oscar nominations, winning the Best Foreign Language Film for *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and the Best Director Academy Award for *Brokeback Mountain.* While most of his movies have been in English, several have been in Chinese, including *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, about which Lee says, "Making a martial arts film in English to me is the same as John Wayne speaking Chinese in a Western"; his most recent film, *Lust, Caution* is also in Chinese.

List of Major Films

Pushing Hands (1992)

The Wedding Banquet (1993)

Eat Drink Man Woman (1994)

Sense and Sensibility (1995)

The Ice Storm (1997)

Ride with the Devil (1999)

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (2000)

Hulk (2003)

Brokeback Mountain (2005)

Lust, Caution (2007)

Themes and Questions to Consider

1. While food is celebrated in *Eat Drink Man Woman*, mealtimes for the family are anything but celebratory. Do a close reading of those meal scenes. What happens? What doesn't happen? What can we learn about the family and their relationships from those scenes?
2. Ang Lee has said this about his films: "Nothing stands still. That's important in my movies. People want to believe in something, want to hang on to something to get security and want to trust each other. But things change. Given enough time, nothing stands still. I think seeking for security and lack of security is another thing in my movies." Apply this to your viewing *of Eat Drink Man Woman*. In the face of change, how does each of the characters seek security? How successful are they in this endeavor?
3. Issues of gender roles are often central in Ang Lee's films. His first three films are often referred to as his "Father Knows Best" trilogy. Examine the role of the patriarch in these films. What are the father figures like? How do

their roles as patriarchs affect them? Their families? Their relationships? What does the film suggest about that patriarchy?

4. *Sense and Sensibility*, Lee's sumptuous adaptation of the Jane Austen novel, is a departure from his earlier films in that it is not about Chinese characters, but it also addresses issues of power, powerlessness, and the patriarchy. In what ways are the sisters in the story victims of a patriarchal system? What is their predicament? Why is that their predicament? While the final scene is in some ways a classic image for a romantic comedy, what is the significance of the final image?
5. According to Ang Lee, "Everywhere can be home and everywhere is not really home and you have to deal with loneliness and alienation." Apply this quote to the protagonists in *Brokeback Mountain.*

6. Ang Lee has said, "I'm a drifter and an outsider. There's not a single environment I can totally belong to. My cultural roots are totally elusive." While this quote is about his place as a Chinese/Taiwanese/American, its notions of being an Other, an Outsider, might explain the sympathy with which he portrays a startling range of characters, from the women in *Sense and Sensibility* to the men in *Brokeback Mountain*, perhaps even to the *Hulk.* How does their "outsider" status affect each of these characters?

Casebook: Chang-Rae Lee

Background

Born in Korea in 1965 and immigrating to the United States when he was three, Lee grew up on the East Coast and got a degree in English at Yale before coming to the West and getting his MFA at the University of Oregon. He is currently a professor at Princeton, though he is taking a sabbatical as the Writer-in-Residence at the Punahou School, a renowned prep school in Honolulu.

Bibliography

***Native Speaker* (1995) Winner of the PEN/Hemingway Award**

This novel, described in detail in this project, explores themes of isolation and alienation through the voice of its narrator, a "spook"/spy whose very invisibility makes him a valuable commodity as he learns the secrets of those upon whom he spies, yet his personal and professional life is imperiled by his inability to know who he is.

***A Gesture Life* (1999)**

This novel continues Lee's examination of a protagonist's alienation and detachment as the narrator, Franklin "Doc" Hata, struggles to connect with the people around him—his daughter, his neighbors, his lover, his friends. His alienation stems in part from his multiply divided self—a Korean adopted by Japanese who has come to America, haunted by his memories of the fate of Korean "comfort women" in World War II. He responds to his pain by living a "gesture life"—one bound by a propriety and politeness that distances him even from those whom he loves.

Aloft **(2004)**

This novel is both a continuation and shift from Lee's earlier work: the protagonist here is not Asian American but a white upper-class suburbanite, Jerry Battle, who lives in Long Island. The theme of alienation and detachment continues, however, as the narrative focuses on (the less-than-subtly named) Battle and his primary means of entertainment—flying his airplane alone, high above the neighborhood in which he lives.

Themes: Questions to Consider

As the brief synopses of this novels suggest, alienation is a key theme for this writer. For any of these works or for shorter excerpts such as the one mentioned earlier in this project, the key questions should focus on alienation:

6. How and from whom is the protagonist alienated? How does Lee work symbolically to show that alienation?
7. What factors shape and exacerbate that alienation?
8. What roles do culture, gender, and language play in the protagonist's predicament?
9. With whom are you most sympathetic in the text—with the protagonist or with those who are struggling to maintain a relationship with him?
10. Read W.E.B. Dubois' comments on "the divided self." How do those comments apply here?
11. What solutions does the text offer, if any, for the protagonist's inner conflict?
12. Do a close reading of the final paragraphs of the text. What do they suggest to you?

Casebook: Mira Nair

Background

Mira Nair was born in India in 1957, and she grew up there, attending Catholic schools and Delhi University before leaving at age 19 for the United States, where she had a scholarship to Harvard University. She began her film making with a series of documentaries, but her first major film—which was nominated for an Oscar as Best Foreign Language Film—was *Salaam Bombay!* (1988). She has gone on to direct an impressive array of films; like the other filmmakers in this project, she has directed films about a range of subjects: the street children of *Bombay*, the Cuban American *Perez Family*, the 18th century world of *Vanity Fair*, and the Punjabi culture in *Monsoon Wedding*. The goal of her production company, Mirabai Films, is to create films "that question cultural barriers and depict worlds that are both true to their culture and universal in their appeal."

Major Films

Salaam Bombay! (1988)

Mississippi Masala (1991)

The Perez Family (1995)

Monsoon Wedding (2001)

Vanity Fair (2004)

The Namesake (2006)

Themes and Questions to Consider

1. Mira Nair has said that her aim in films is to "question cultural barriers." Although her films seem at first to by about widely disparate topics, they all share the theme of boundaries—the building of them, the crossing of them, the difficulties that those crossings entail. Choose two of her films and examine their presentation of these themes. What are the barriers: are they caused by class? By gender? By culture? By the past? Who seeks to maintain those barriers? Who seeks to cross them? To what effect?
2. *Salaam Bombay!* clearly illustrates Nair's sociological interests as it follows the lives of street boys, most of whom are played not by actors but by boys who do, in fact, live on the streets of Bombay. What is the argument of the film? What do you make of its final scene?
3. One critic has dismissed *Monsoon Wedding* as a "*My Big Fat Punjabi Wedding*," entertaining but of little substance. After viewing both films, argue against this stance. In what ways is *Monsoon Wedding* a more substantive film? What issues does it tackle? What arguments does it make?

Casebook: Lisa See

Background

Born in Paris in 1955, Lisa See grew up in Los Angeles, particularly Chinatown. She has been a major force in American literature since the publication of her first book in 1995, with her work continually on major Bestseller and Notable Book Lists, both in the New York and Los Angeles Times. An influential figure (like her great-grandfather Fong See) in the Los Angeles community, she wrote the libretto for *On Gold Mountain*, which was performed by the Los Angeles Opera, she was a pivotal figure in the exhibit on Asian Americans at the Autry Museum, and she was named National Woman of the Year in 2001 by the Organization of Chinese American Women. She frequently does readings and talks in the Los Angeles area (I went to see her at Vroman's Bookstore and at the Pacific Asian Museum), and she draws an enthusiastic and multicultural fan base as she talks movingly about her search for a voice and a place as she is of both cultures: she is a red-headed, freckled woman who looks white but who feels Chinese; she writes in English books about Chinese characters, often set in times past in China.

Bibliography

On Gold Mountain: The 100 Year Odyssey of My Chinese-American Family (nonfiction, 1995)
The Flower Net (1997)
The Interior (1999)
Dragon Bones (2003)
Snow Flower and the Secret Fan (2005)
Peony in Love (2007)
365 Days in China (2007)

Themes and Questions to Consider

1. See's books reveal a daunting knowledge and understanding of Chinese history and, in *On Gold Mountain*, of the history of Chinese Americans in California. Questions about these issues would be especially appropriate in English classes paired with history classes. Of particular interest would be how the cultural practices and laws affected the lives of women.
2. For *Snow Flower* and *Peony in Love*, the issues of women's spaces and roles are pertinent. Questions to consider might include the following:
    a. What is the role of footbinding? What is its stated purpose? What are its implied purposes? How do the women in the text feel about footbinding—both as the daughters who are bound and the mothers who must bind them? Find relevant passages and explore them.

    b. In what ways are the interior spaces to which women are relegated in the text a sanctuary? In what ways are they a prison? How do the various women in the text respond to these spaces?

    c. Lisa See has stated her interest in the desire of women to be heard. Explore the roles and forms of secret languages in the texts. What are these secret languages? How are they used? How do they survive? What is their function? How is literacy connected to power?

    d. *Snow Flower* and *Peony in Love* provide insight into particular cultural practices and rites of the past—of laotong relationships and of the rites and experiences of the afterlife. Explore what you learned of these two systems. How do they work? What is their function? Can you find

parallels between these and Western ideas with which you are more familiar?

e. Do some research on anorexia, and explore the connections you can make between this disease and the "love-sick maiden" syndrome described in *Peony in Love.*

(Note: Reader's Guide and Discussion Questions are available about *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* and *Peony in Love* on the internet.)

Casebook: Amy Tan

Background

Perhaps the most well-known and commercially successful of contemporary Asian American writers, Amy Tan was born in Oakland, California to parents who were Chinese immigrants to the United States, having come here to escape the Chinese civil war. A look at Tan's family history reveals a number of themes that would eventually shape her writing. Her mother, for instance, had divorced an abusive husband and was forced to leave behind three daughters in China when she left before the onset of the Communist takeover in 1949; this kind of loss and the guilt that accompanies it plays a major part in *The Joy Luck Club.* Tan also experienced sudden and cataclysmic loss, as do some of her characters, when her father and eldest brother died of brain tumors within one year of each other. Tan's life as a teen and young adult was marked by conflict with her mother, a theme that is central to *The Joy Luck Club,* and early in her writing life, she worked for a business writing firm, often writing under pseudonyms, a theme we see in *The Bonesetter's Daughter,* in which Ruth Young, who annually (and significantly) loses her voice, works as a ghost writer. Tan, who studied music seriously as a young girl and who rejected that path for a time (a theme again explored in *Joy Luck),* is currently working on a libretto for the San Francisco Opera. Tan's website has a very funny essay under "Myths and Legends" in which she debunks a number of the urban legends that have grown up around her, thanks, as she says, to the "Ubiquitous Uncontrollable Universe" dimension of the internet, whose "48,291 websites" on her report enthusiastically a range of things that just aren't true. The essay, which was published under the title "Persona Errata" in her memoir *The Opposite of Fate* is wryly entertaining,

a nice counterpoint to the worshipful tone of some of the websites she is debunking. Also of interest is an essay on Lyme's disease; she contracted the disease in 1999, had a terrible time getting it diagnosed, and tells the story on her website.

Bibliography

The Joy Luck Club (1989)

The Kitchen God's Wife (1991)

A Hundred Secret Senses (1995)

The Bonesetter's Daughter (2001)

The Opposite of Fate: A Book of Musings (2003)

Saving Fish From Drowning (2005)

Themes and Questions to Consider

1. Explore the ways in which Tan's own life helped shape the narratives within *The Joy Luck Club.*
2. A central theme in Amy Tam's work is the existence of secrets between mothers and daughters and the tensions that arise from those secrets. Explore these secrets. What are they? Why are they held? What consequences do they have for the women?
3. *The Bonesetter's Daughter* deals powerfully with a woman's need for voice, equating that voice with an assertion of self. How does Tan make clear in Book One that Ruth has no voice? Consider her bouts of laryngitis, her job, her relationships.
4. How do their mothers' pasts affect the young women in these stories? Choose one mother and daughter pair and explore this question.

5. In what ways do the dreams and ambitions of their parents affect the daughters of the four strands of *The Joy Luck Club*? While most parents and children struggle with sometimes conflicting hopes and aims, how does their position as immigrants intensify the conflict for these families?
6. Contrast a daughter who has followed her family's and culture's expectations for being a "good" daughter with a daughter who has rebelled against those expectations. What are the costs to each?

Casebook: Wayne Wang

Background

Born in 1949 in Hong Kong, Wayne Wang began, he has said in interviews, like "all good Chinese sons," going to medical school. Ultimately, though, he became interested in painting and got his undergraduate degree in that, then studied film and television at the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland. He established his reputation as a filmmaker with several independent films about Asian American life, with the experimental *Chan is Missing* and *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, an adaptation of Louis Chu's important novel, being especially well received. After several missteps, his work with Amy Tan on a film adaptation of *The Joy Luck Club* re-established his reputation. His later work has shifted solidly in the direction of Hollywood films, achieving more commercial than critical success.

List of Major Films

Chan is Missing (1982)

Dim Sum: A little Bit of Heart (1985)

Eat a Bowl of Tea (1989)

The Joy Luck Club (1993)

Smoke (1995)

Chinese Box (1997)

Maid in Manhattan (2002)

Because of Winn-Dixie (2005)

Last Holiday (2006)

Themes and Questions to Consider

1. In his earliest films, Wang was acclaimed for his presentation of the "real" Chinatown, not the caricature so common in popular films and fiction. And that "real" Chinatown is peopled by an enormous range of Chinese Americans. Examine the different images of Chinese Americans that the films present.
2. For *Chan is Missing*, students could explore the contrast between the two male protagonists, Jo and Steve. How are they different? What do they suggest about adapting to and adopting the mainstream culture?
3. In some ways, the search for the missing Chan acts as a metaphor for what the editors of *Bold Words* call "the vast and unknowable Asian America." As Jo and Steve search for Chan, they discover that he is many different things to different people. What are the different images they get of Chan? What do you make of the end of the film, in which Chan is not located and remains unknown? Play back the final voice over as you consider this question.
4. For many years, the comedic Charlie Chan was the only major Asian figure in American film. Contrast his image and foibles with the Chan figure of this film.
5. *Eat a Bowl of Tea* examines Chinatown as it shifts from the bachelor society that was mandated by American immigration laws to a family-oriented society that permitted the immigration of women, the marriage of the men. What issues arise because of this state of transition?
6. *Eat a Bowl of Tea* raises questions about the ways in which a culture defines manhood. How was manhood constructed when Chinatown was a bachelor

society? How will manhood be constructed in the shift to a family society? What is the significance of Ben Loy's impotence? What is its cause? How is it a symbol of a larger cultural issue?

7. How does the importance of filial duty affect the young protagonists in *Dim Sum* and in *Eat a Bowl of Tea*?

APPENDIX:

SECONDARY SOURCES

The New York Times
nytimes.com

April 1, 2004

Heading Home to Adultery and Angst; A New Generation of Authors Discovers the Suburbs

By CHARLES MCGRATH

Like the suburbs themselves, the suburban novel seemed for a while to go out of fashion: too old, too square, too white and middle class. Except for a few die-hards like Rick Moody and A. M. Homes, the younger novelists were apparently moving out and taking up residence in new fictional territory.

They were writing historical novels, like Kathryn Harrison and Brooks Hansen; they were traveling to Eastern Europe and reinventing magic realism, like Jonathan Safran Foer; they were working on brainy, Foster Wallace-style epics; like Alan Furst and Jonathan Lethem, they were working the fertile ground where so-called literary writing intersects with genre fiction; or, like Jonathan Franzen in "The Corrections," they were writing novels in which the suburbs had been abandoned by the young and were inhabited now by the old and the gaga.

No one was left back in the old tree-shaded neighborhoods, a reader could be forgiven for thinking, except for the two Johns: Updike and the ghost of Cheever, gloomily surveying the well-kept lawns and the empty swimming pools and wondering where all the action had gone.

But the suburban novel appears to be back, at least as imagined by a younger generation. These recent novels, especially "Little Children" by Tom Perrotta and "Aloft" by Chang-rae Lee (a former suburban neighbor and a friend), suggest that there are important stories still to be found in the land of the split-level and the McMansion, the land where many pollsters, as it happens, believe the [illegible] election will be won or lost.

These novels and others like them may even tell us a few things the pollsters cannot. They're also a reminder that the American vision of suburbia has been created by novels and stories at least as much as it has been described by them. The suburbs aren't just a place anymore; they're a state of mind.

Suburban fiction is essentially a postwar phenomenon, partly because before the war there weren't that many suburbs to speak of (we still lived in town or on the farm) and partly because it took the postwar economy to create the necessary wealth, upward mobility and corresponding rootlessness to nurture the proper suburban hero. A lot of classic American novels -- from James, say, through Howells and Wharton and even up to O'Hara -- are really novels of manners; they're about arranging marriages, making and losing fortunes, finding your place in the social pecking order.

The suburban hero -- living in Cheever's Shady Hill, Updike's Tarbox or Richard Yates's Revolutionary Estates -- has none of these problems. He's already married (in literary suburbia there are virtually no single people), he's got enough money (or at least no more worries than the next guy) and still he's unfulfilled. He yearns for something else, something more, if only he knew what it was.

Many of the great suburban characters -- like Mr. Updike's Rabbit Angstrom; Cheever's Neddy Merrill, hero of "The Swimmer"; or Frank Bascombe, the narrator of Richard Ford's "Independence Day" -- are frustrated poets of a sort, who see their world, every leaf and shingle and stone-walled cul-de-sac, with almost visionary clarity and sensitivity. That the suburbs shine so brightly in our collective imagination, and look so lovely, is largely because we have seen them through the eyes of people like this, who experience their surroundings (where they never feel entirely at home) with such ardor and sensitivity that they sometimes seem suspiciously like authors themselves (a problem that Mr. Ford neatly gets around by making Frank Bascombe an ex-sportswriter).

"Oh What a Paradise It Seems" is the title of Cheever's last book, which like much of his writing evokes a town that is more a fabled, mythical place than a real one. But to a certain extent all the famous fictional suburbs -- Mr. Updike's Tarbox and Penn Park; Mr. Ford's Haddam, N.J.; Philip Roth's Old Rimrock -- are earthly paradises, places where the American dream has seemingly come to expensive, landscaped fruition.

I[illegible]itably they're also fallen paradises, plagued (as America itself is plagued, some critics would say) by spiritual emptiness and a

sense of collective purposelessness. Alcohol flows through these novels like a seductive potion: not just in Cheever, with his lonely, hungover husbands, but in David Gates's bleak novels "Jernigan" and "Preston Falls," in which everyone is either an alcoholic or a druggie or both. And where would the suburban novel be without adultery? The sharp tang of sex is everywhere, an anodyne and occasionally the way to transcendence.

In some sense the suburban novel never quite went away. In recent years there have been sunnier versions: books like Frederick Reiken's "Lost Legends of New Jersey" and James Kaplan's "Two Guys From Verona" (also set in the Garden State), in which the burbs are less a spiritual condition than the backdrop for more or less ordinary stories of middle-class families.

But in the popular imagination it's the darker view that prevails, the one evoked by Rick Moody's "Ice Storm," say, or by Mr. Roth's "American Pastoral," which was anything but. Out of impatience and frustration, it seemed, A. M. Homes's 1999 novel, "Music for Torching," literally set fire to the whole enterprise, with a Westchester couple who out of boredom and self-loathing burned down their own house and by implication the literary tradition that sustained it.

Mr. Perrotta's "Little Children" also subverts the conventions but in ways that leave a few bricks standing. The book's smartest and most sympathetic character is a woman (in itself a break with the suburban-novel tradition), and the big issue here in the fictional town of Bellington -- politicians take note -- is child care. "Little Children" makes you realize with a start how absent children are from a lot of classic suburban writing, or else how they're reduced to walk-on roles as the adults get on with the more important business of drinking and sleeping with other people's spouses.

What propels this novel is not sexual passion or spiritual malaise but the exigencies of domestic responsibility. Much of the action takes place not at parties or in adulterous bedrooms but in playgrounds and at the town swimming pool; and when an affair does take place, the lovers are pushed into each other's arms less by an upswelling of Updikean sensuality than by boredom and simple propinquity (and because the husband of one is devoting all his romantic energy to a Web site maintained by someone who calls herself Slutty Kay). "Little Children" does include the requisite sensitive suburban guy, except in this case he proves to be a dope; he can't even get it together to turn up at an assignation on time because he's too busy admiring the skateboard antics of younger dudes.

At one point many of the characters in "Little Children" attend a meeting of the Bellington Ladies' Belletristic Society, a book group that is discussing "Madame Bovary," possibly the first and in many ways still the greatest of the suburban novels, the one that established the potent combination of romantic yearning and a provincial setting. The older women in the group, all widows, are fascinated by the book; most of the younger ones don't get it at all, and the reader senses that they have little use for fiction of any [illegible] This is the author's slyest and most disarming critique: a suburb where even the suburban novel seems alien and impractical.

To judge from Mr. Lee's novel "Aloft," people in the suburbs don't have time to read because they're too busy. The Long Island of this book is a place of almost frantic motion. As bulldozers chew up the remaining farmland, people are moving in by droves, all kinds of people, not just the WASPy Republicans of old-fashioned Suburbanland; they're moving up (or in some cases sliding back down), they're landscaping and remodeling and building on additions.

"Aloft" occasionally even picks up on one of the themes of "Good Faith," Jane Smiley's 2003 novel about real-estate speculation in the 1980's: that sex isn't the only thing on the suburbanite's mind. There's also real-estate lust: the hope of selling high, buying low and, like the hapless Markham family in "Independence Day," who house-hunt their way through 45 different listings, of finding at last the place that more than any other feels like home.

That's what we all want, and it's why the suburban novel remains so insightful. It performs the still useful fictional trick of showing suburbanites to themselves, and to those of us who spend at least part of the time in the suburbs of the mind. Almost every American visits there at one time or another: that verdant place that seems to promise so much and so often fails to deliver on the promise. Wherever we go, these novels suggest, we bring our discontent and a yearning for someplace better.

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Chang-Rae Lee on assimilation, his influences and teaching writing

By: Jessica Kerry

Posted: 11/14/06

The Herald interviewed award-winning author, Chang-rae Lee yesterday, who came to the University as part of Asian American History Month. Lee's debut novel, "Native Speaker," won the Pen/Hemingway Award and the National Book Award in 1995.He followed that up with "A Gesture Life," which was released in 2000. His most recent novel is "Aloft," which was released in 2004.

Many have commented that your novels, particularly the first two, are stories about assimilation and grappling with the "American Dream." To what extent has your background - emigrating from Korea to the United States at a young age - informed your writing?
My experience as an immigrant in an immigrant family is absolutely essential to my life and to my writing. Not that I'll always write about those things. ... I've always thought a lot about - even before I thought about being a writer - about belonging and difference and about feeling like there is an outsider (sensibility) to our life, whether we wanted it or not. ... The books are about the problems about being an outsider, the problems of assimilating. It's all about the kind of complicated engagement that we had as a family, being in a place that didn't really recognize us and didn't really see us and didn't really understand us, but that we wanted to be in.

"Aloft" is your first novel that features a protagonist who is not Asian-American. Did you approach this character differently than the previous protagonists?
I was really thinking about a character in a particular time of life in a particular place in America, a classic post war suburb. And I actually thought about, "Well who is this guy, is he Asian, is he an immigrant, is he someone who's been there for a while?" I decided that I wanted to write a story about someone who felt like he completely was at the center of the story, that he completely belonged, that he was at the core of his social and cultural community. Someone who never questioned it. And in that sense I think he had to be not an immigrant, probably white, probably middle-aged. Because it becomes a different story entirely if I place a Korean-American man of that age in that locale and in that situation - the whole story is different.

Many people peg you as a voice for a young generation of second-generation Korean- or Asian-Americans. What do you make of that?
Well, I think that they might - and if they do, that's fine. I don't think of myself that way. I just think of myself as, you know, a writer. And one hopes a serious one. And one hopes one that's read for some time. I'll always write about certain things, but I'll also write about things that surprise people. So, it's never good to be at the head of any kind of movement, because the movement's not defined very well.

Who are your literary influences?

Well, early on, I loved Hemingway. I loved Joyce. I loved American writers like Dos Passos. I always loved writers who had a real deep relationship with language - whether it was poetic lofty language or whether it was language like Hemingway's. As long as they had a distinct voice and a distinct relationship with the y that they were making their mark, I always felt like I had a connection with them.

Could you explain your writing process and how you go about creating a character?
Mostly, a character is just sort of impaled upon everything that I look at, and he just doesn't go away. It's not so much that he's created but that he keeps appearing. The more he keeps appearing, I just ask more questions and then soon enough there's a story. It's always with the characters, never with the real situation. Again it's almost accidental, and it's quite mysterious why I'm interested in particular people, like in "Aloft."

You're the director of creative writing at Princeton. How does writing influence your teaching or vice-versa?
Well, they're sort of opposing activities. Partly because one wants to write when one's teaching. The biggest thing is that teaching is about thinking about other people's imaginations and thinking about other people's artistic needs and considerations. And writing is completely the opposite. Writing is about being completely self-centered and thinking about only what you're thinking about. ... That said, I enjoy the teaching. Everytime after I come out of class, I find that I've enjoyed it. Does it help my writing? No. The one thing that it does help is that I see the very nascent passion that younger writers have and sometimes I forget. You can forget about the swell of heat and passion you got when you were that age or younger and starting out.

Do you have any advice for bourgeoning writers?
The only advice would be to read a lot and everything. And to have a lot of passion for it. Instead of wanting to be a writer, to write. A lot of people want to be a writer, it seems to me, and they do everything y can to be a writer, except write.

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