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A HISTORY OF CALIFORNIA  
LITERATURE

EDITED BY

BLAKE ALLMENDINGER

*UCLA*



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the following essay. "As the migrants cross the border," Ana Maria Manzanas Calvo writes in "Contested Passages: Migrants Crossing the Rio Grande and the Mediterranean Sea," "they go through what Mary Pat Brady calls an 'abjection machine' that metamorphoses them into something else' . . . and renders them 'unintelligible (and unintelligent), ontologically impossible, outside the real and the human'" [*South Atlantic Quarterly* 105: 4 (Fall 2006): 765]. Such criticism is intended as a correction and indictment of unjust state and federal policies towards immigrants. But, enchanted with its own rhetoric, a great deal of this work runs the risk of estranging readers from the people who live in this existential void. It is not, after all, always dusk in the twilight zone where such individuals rise for work, raise their children, cook their dinners, and go to sleep each night. See Santiago Vaquera-Vasquez's innovative hybrid of memoir and criticism in "Notes from an Unrepentent Border Crosser" for a particularly interesting assessment of the relationship between "old-style border studies, grounded in history and the empiricism of the social sciences" (702) and contemporary cultural studies.

6. I have not categorized Ana Castillo or Alicia Gaspar de Alba as California writers, but the former's work demystifying the glamor of desert violence in *The Guardians* (2007) and the latter's in *Desert Blood: The Suarez Murders* (2005) demand and deserve special mention here.

7. Auerbach, 113. This language is Auerbach's, but it could have been drawn from any number of critical studies.

8. "Imperceptibly and almost without comment," as Michael Dear and Gustavo Leclerc write in "Tijuana Desemascara," Tijuana has "emerged as the second largest city on the western seaboard of North and Central and Central America." [*Wide Angle* 20.3 (1998): 219 (211-221)]. I have drawn on their account of Tijuana, which enables them to argue that Mexican and U.S. border cities develop and evolve in tandem, throughout this paragraph.

#### CHAPTER 20

### *Interracial Encounters: Face and Place in Post-1980 Asian American Literature*

King-Kok Cheung

Asian American writers who try to capture the interactions among peoples of diverse ethnicities arguably have offered some of the most prismatic views of California. This essay concentrates on selected post-1980 fiction and memoirs set against various historical currents of the twentieth century: emigration of Koreans after Japanese annexation of their country, postcolonial migration of Filipino Americans in search of the American dream, the Japanese American internment during World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights and the attendant Asian American movements, the 1965 Watts Riots, and the 1992 Los Angeles uprising. I use 1980 (the year in which an ancestry question appeared for the first time in the U.S. census) as a marker because the rise of multicultural curricular reform during the 1980s had ushered in an unprecedented number of publications by people from hitherto marginalized groups, including Asian American writers.<sup>1</sup> The texts selected, representing a much wider array of nationalities than those published previously, are quite dense in historical, social, and cultural contexts; they also have a distinctly regional flavor that against another backdrop would be lost. Instead of discussing the works according to their dates of publication, I have grouped them around common concerns and geographical settings, holding up a literary mirror to the polyglot state in all its faces.

#### Suspended Between Shores

This section covers fiction that straddles Asia and the United States. In *Clay Walls* Ronyoung Kim tells the story of a Korean couple who arrive in Los Angeles in the 1920s, after the Japanese annexation of Korea in 1910 and the Declaration of Korean Independence on March 1, 1919 — a campaign of resistance against the Japanese that led to a violent suppression in which more than 7,000 Koreans were killed.<sup>2</sup> Although the novel is divided into three parts, told from the perspectives of Haesu (a Korean

woman from a *Yanban* or aristocratic family), Chun (her peasant-stock husband), and Faye (the sole daughter among their three American children) respectively, it centers on the transpacific vicissitudes of Haesu, who flees Korea involuntarily with Chun, after he is mistaken for a student protester during the March 1 movement. She sorely misses her homeland and her *Yanban* status.

Haesu nevertheless survives her double estrangement in Korea under Japanese occupancy and in the United States as a *déclassé* exile. At first, she clings to her dream of returning to an independent Korea, supporting the Independence movement from Los Angeles and buying land in Korea. At one point, she takes her children back to Korea with the intent of settling, but is appalled by the Japanese subjugation of her people, feeling homesick in the very presence of her homeland. All the same, she uses the money won by Chun through gambling to buy land there, expecting Korea to be independent some day. Ironically, the situation hardly improves after Japanese defeat and the partition of Korea into two countries at the end of World War II; Haesu loses her homelcoming dream along with the land she has purchased in North Korea. Meanwhile, her family must confront numerous racial barriers in Los Angeles. The book opens with her cleaning a toilet under the patronizing gaze of a white housewife who calls her "insolent yellow," whereupon Haesu quits her cleaning job. Because of Alien Land laws and housing segregation, the couple must use the names of their white associates to rent a place and, later, to buy a house. After their son John is called a "chink" at public school, Haesu tries to enroll her two sons in Edwards Military Academy, only to be told that the school does not admit Orientals. Also on account of race her son Harold is turned down for officer-training in the marines during World War II. However, Haesu's rancor toward the Japanese far exceeds her vexation with whites. Not so with Faye: though forbidden by her mother to befriend Japanese, her closest buddy is Japanese American.

Raquel "Rocky" Rivera and Gabe Sullivan, the first-person Filipino narrators of mixed descent in Jessica Hagedorn's *Gangster of Love* and Brian Ascalon Roley's *American Son* respectively, grapple with their ethnic identities while interacting with people of heterogeneous backgrounds.<sup>3</sup> In *Gangster of Love* Rocky, her brother Voltaire, and their mother Milagros arrive in San Francisco in 1970 – the year Jimi Hendrix (Voltaire's idol) died. Growing up as a young adult in the Bay Area in the 1970s, Rocky falls in love with Elvis Chang, a Chinese American guitarist and rock musician, and meets Keiko Van Heller, a bisexual

photographer who becomes her lifelong friend. Together they launch the eponymous rock band and head for New York, where Rocky remains in constant contact with her mother on the West Coast via phone calls. After a miscarriage and Elvis's love affair with Keiko, Rocky has a daughter with Jake Montano, a Cuban American sound engineer. When Milagros's health declines, Rocky shuttles between New York and San Francisco until her mother's death. Rocky then returns to the Philippines and reunites with her dying father.

This picaresque mosaic evokes what Keru Kartak calls "simultaneity of geography" – the state of living in one place physically and in another place psychologically.<sup>4</sup> Rocky longs simultaneously to reinvent herself and belong to a community. Her life in San Francisco is shot through with memories of the Philippines, and her time in New York is filled with reminiscences about San Francisco. The liaisons among Rocky, Elvis, and Keiko attest to the fluid connection among Asians of assorted nationalities on the West Coast. At the same time, despite the novel's motley ensemble that reflects the sweeping pop cultures of San Francisco and New York, Rocky often finds herself an outsider. Like the people closest to her – Voltaire (who wishes he were Jimi Hendrix), Elvis (the Presley wannabe), and her gay Uncle Marlon (an actor *manqué*) – she is enthralled by a Hollywood that eludes Asian American aspirants. Her decision to return to the Philippines might be seen as her attempt to reassert her indigenous identity and as her disillusionment with cultural Americana, which is at once enchanting and tantalizing. If Manila represents the pull of the homeland and New York demands complete assimilation, San Francisco seems to offer Rocky the possibility of intersecting ethnic tradition (embodied by Milagros) and American culture. Ultimately, she is like the yo-yo – the novel's recurrent trope for Filipino ethnicity – fluctuating between coasts.

Unlike Rocky, Gabe (the fifteen-year-old biracial narrator in Roley's *American Son*) and his older brother Tomas are totally alienated from their Filipino heritage, as promulgated by their Uncle Betino in the Philippines. This novel follows the two brothers' wanderings in contemporary California, from upscale mansions in the Hollywood Hills to dilapidated Los Angeles barrios. Tomas breeds pricey attack dogs, trains them in German using Nazi techniques, and foists them on Hollywood celebrities. Gabe tries to steer clear of Tomas's delinquent ways, but is hopelessly enmeshed in his brother's shady schemes. Their Filipina mother has moved from Manila to America with her abusive white husband, who marries her because he wants someone "meek and obedient." Now divorced, she tries

in vain to instill Filipino values and Catholic faith in her sons while holding down two dead-end jobs.

Two instances of racial passing illustrate the Sullivan brothers' disavowal of their Filipino origin and the entanglement of masculinity, race, and class. Tomas models himself on a Mexican gangster, sporting a shaved head and copious tattoos. Trying to pass for Mexican, he is caught out by a potential buyer's Mexican wife, whom he ironically has mistaken for a maid. His appropriation of machismo extends to vicious behavior toward his own brother, at whom he lashes out frequently. Gabe tries to run away after Tomas brutally curs his chest with a broken beer bottle. He is offered a ride by a white tow truck driver, who spouts demeaning slurs about Mexicans, Cambodians, Vietnamese, and Laotians without realizing that Gabe is of partial Asian ancestry. When his mother and his white aunt finally catch up with Gabe, he tells the driver that the aunt is his mom and the Filipina is their maid. Although the two brothers respond to racism differently — one passes for Mexican and the other for white — their common need to eclipse their Asian identity illustrates the prevalence of social bigotry and the extent of self-hate. Tomas dissembles as Mexican to slough off the stereotype of the feminized Oriental; Gabe pretends to be white to set himself apart from the minorities that the white driver denounces. The two brothers have moved away from the religion and obligations of the old world only to be stranded in the new.

In Lê Thi Diem Thy's "The Gangster We Are All Looking For," published separately in *Massachusetts Review*, *Harper's Magazine*, and *The Best American Essays* (1999) before it became a chapter in a novel with the same title, a number of metaphors connect a Vietnamese family's displacement in Vietnam and in San Diego.<sup>5</sup> A barbed wire gate in a reeducation camp separating the father from his wife and daughter in South Vietnam resurfaces as a chain-link fence that cordons off their apartment complex in Linda Vista, San Diego, about to be razed to make way for condominiums priced above the means of the evicted residents. Tropical fish from a broken tank that the father throws outside their American apartment's door are reminiscent of the narrator's brother's body pulled from the South China Sea and the bodies of boat people washed to various shores. A photo of the mother's parents, taken in the courtyard of their home in Vietnam, sits forgotten in the Linda Vista attic; the mother, once a Catholic schoolgirl disowned by her parents for marrying a Buddhist gangster and further cut off from them in leaving Vietnam, undergoes yet another wrenching valediction when the photo is annihilated along with their apartment. Adjustment to San Diego is made

the more difficult for the young narrator by ogling neighbors and white classmates, who call all their Southeast Asian peers "Yang" — refugees who reflexively deem themselves to be wanting in beauty, popularity, and intelligence. The sobriquet, like the eponymous "gangster," speaks to identities vacated on crossing the ocean.

Angie Chau's chapter "Quiet as They Come" (from a novel with the same title) and Andrew Lam's short story "Show and Tell" also feature newcomers suspended between Vietnam and the United States.<sup>6</sup> Their experiences are likewise shaped by the "simultaneity of geography," beset by racial discrimination, and aggravated by their designation as refugees. Chau's novel follows extended family members who have fled to San Francisco in the mid-1970s; this particular chapter revolves around Viet Tran, a father of two daughters who once envisioned himself a chancellor at a Vietnamese university but who now holds a monotonous job sorting mail by zip code at a post office. His coworkers consider Vietnamese immigrants to be as quiet as they come and Viet to be the mutest. The truth is that Viet's heavy accent makes him self-conscious. After his attractive daughter visits him at the post office, a black coworker named Melvin, a playboy, makes lewd remarks about her, unaware that Viet is hanging on his every obscene word. Tension mounts as the seething father, who obviously suffers from post-traumatic syndrome, recalls how he once killed a pirate about to rape his wife during their harrowing voyage as boat people, as though he were poised to pounce on Mel in like fashion. However, the chapter ends with Mel apologizing to Viet and enfolding him in a warm embrace.

Andrew Lam's "Show and Tell" traces the painful initiation in an American classroom of seventh-grader Cao Long Dinh (Kal), a Vietnamese refugee who speaks broken English, and his evolving friendship with Robert, the story's white narrator tasked by the teacher to show Cao around during the first day of school. Both Kal and Robert are teased by Billy, a bully who calls Kal a Viet Cong and Robert his new boyfriend. During Show and Tell, Billy brings in his father's old army uniform and talks pointedly about the wounds his father has received from fighting in Vietnam. Kal, in turn, communicates by drawing on the chalkboard and prompting Robert to supply the verbal narrative. After scribbling two boys (he and his friend) on buffaloes, a couple (his parents) holding hands, a man (his Dad) behind a barbed wire fence with chains on his ankles, a small boat, an island, and an airplane, and sketching a map of America along with its famous landmarks, Kal draws a heart around the Vietnamese scenes and another around the American



ones. Robert effectively transforms Kai's illustrations into words and, in the process, overcomes his own inhibition and fear of Billy. Two boys differently marginalized — one by race and the other by sexual orientation — have found each other and connected across language barriers.

### Creating Communities in San Francisco

Gus Lee's *China Boy* and William Poy Lee's *The Eighth Promise* chronicle the struggles of two Chinese Americans, China-born and U.S.-born respectively, in San Francisco.<sup>7</sup> *China Boy* (a novel that according to the author is a thinly veiled autobiography) describes the tribulations and eventual triumph of Kai, a seven-year-old immigrant growing up in the Panhandle (a predominantly black ghetto) and trying to become an accepted black male youth in the 1950s. The novel abounds in interracial contact: Kai's abuse by an Irish stepmother, friendship with an African American boy and a Jewish boy, verbal and corporal assault by black bullies, and tutelage by multi-ethnic YMCA coaches. Enmity and amity are dealt by those of varied hues in equal measure in Kai's path to manhood.

Edna, Kai's stepmother, resembles the wicked stepmother in fairytales, but her vicious power is bolstered by whiteness. Compared by Kai to German Nazis, she tries to crush any vestiges of Chineseness in her stepson, whose very facial expressions and indeed face can trigger slapping. By compelling Kai to stay outdoors except during meal times and bedtime, she also exposes him to bloody street fights. If Kai is subdued at home by oppressive whiteness in the person of Edna, he is literally hobbled on the street by a black bully named Big Willie. But numerous affectionate relationships between Kai and other people of color make up for the torments these two antagonists inflict. Most significant are the trainers Kai encounters at the Golden Gate YMCA, where he receives boxing lessons for self-defense under surrogate father figures of African American, Italian, Puerto Rican, and Filipino descent, who take the place of Kai's negligent biological father in shepherding their Chinese protégés, much as his black buddy's mother cares for him maternally.

William Poy Lee's *The Eighth Promise: An American Son's Tribute to His Toisanese Mother* spans three generations, linking the mother's upbringing in a Chinese village with the author's coming of age in San Francisco's Chinatown, where he becomes engaged with the Civil Rights Movement and a prolonged battle with the American legal system. Structurally, the memoir alternates between the voice of the American-

born son and that of his emigrant mother, whom the author has interviewed in her Toisanese dialect. The mother has made eight promises to her own mother before leaving war-torn China to join her husband in San Francisco as a young bride in 1949. The eighth promise is to live with compassion toward all — an ethos that sustains her sons through a family tragedy when William's brother is convicted of murder.

Born in 1951 and living in San Francisco for more than four decades, William witnesses vociferous confrontation as well as mutual respect and caring among people of different races. When he is suspended from school for joining a Civil Rights protest, his father belligerently confronts the white principal. Ruthless inmates of color assault William's brother, sentenced to life in a California prison. However, remarkable racial harmony exists in the neighborhood of their boyhood home in the International Section across the street from Portsmouth Square, a multi-hued urban village that shares the communal ethos of their mother's Chinese hamlet. William and other kids are watched over by many beloved figures: Benny Beltran, a trustworthy Filipino American shop owner; a local beat patrolman nicknamed Danny the Wop; and Molly, an Irish prostitute who is also a lover of Sam, proprietor of Sam's Cleaners & Alterations. As in *China Boy*, a strong friendship develops between young William and a black boy when both of them are confined to the TB ward of San Francisco General Hospital, where the patients are offspring of a cross section of San Francisco's working class — Mexican, Irish, Italian, Chinese, and black.

Both Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey* and Karen Tei Yamashita's *I Hotel* capture the vibrant counterculture and political activism of the Civil Rights and Vietnam eras, especially the bids to usher in distinctive Asian Pacific American artistic expressions and to build coalitions and communities among the disfranchised.<sup>8</sup> However, neither author idealizes their main characters. Writman Ah Sing, Berkeley graduate and *Tripmaster Monkey's* bohemian protagonist (who reminds readers of Frank Chin, writer, playwright, and Kingston's most severe critic), must overcome his own ambivalence toward his Chinese ancestry and his sexist attitude toward women. A fifth generation Chinese American residing in San Francisco, Writman looks askance at Chinese immigrants and yet he chastises Asian American women for their ignorance of Chinese classics. He bristles at any tendentious comments directed at people of color but cannot refrain from off color remarks and shenanigans. Pitching himself as the modern reincarnation of the intelligent but intractable Monkey King in the famous Chinese epic *Journey to the West*, he is fired from a toy store after positioning a wind-up brown monkey atop a white Barbie Bride.

The unemployed Wittman decides to start a theater company named Pear Garden Players of America (in Chinese "Pear Garden" refers to operatic circles in general) in which he is the playwright, producer, and director and in which the actors can be of any shade. Connecting his effort directly with the Civil Rights Movement, Wittman seeks to bring together not only Asian Pacific Americans but also anyone who has been sidelined. The play integrates the old and the young, foreign-born and American-born, poets and hobos. In the course of production, Wittman is tamed by women such as Nanci Lee, his Chinese American date; Tana De Weese, a white woman who marries him so he can dodge the draft; and the omniscient narrator, who assumes the voice of the Goddess of Mercy. His exceptionally long play, performed at a community center, epitomizes communal art. On the closing night, Wittman delivers a monologue that signals his transformation. Though still incorrigibly egotistical, he has learned to accept his Chinese ancestry, treat women more or less as equals, and foster camaraderie and even kinship among strangers to combat the loneliness of the American West.

*I Hotel*, a fusion of prose, drama, and graphic art set primarily in San Francisco's Chinatown, can be read as a companion novel or a sequel to *Tripmaster Monkey*, for Yamashita not only includes Kingston and Frank Chin (the duo appears in a series of cartoons in the middle of the text) but also populates her tome with simian mavericks and rebels. The panoramic novel opens in the Lunar New Year of 1968, when ethnic studies was birthed in San Francisco, and ends in 1977, when ethnic studies was birthed in San Francisco, and ends in 1977, panning a racially diverse political movement to save the International Hotel from being demolished by developers. Located on the corner of Kearny and Jackson Streets in the Manilatown-Chinatown section of San Francisco, I Hotel was home to hundreds of Filipino and Chinese bachelors, mostly retired migrant workers who had worked along the Pacific Coast. Chockfull of historical and biographical details, the historical saga brings together the activists of the Asian Community Center, the Black Panthers, the Native Americans taking over Alcatraz, the United Farm Workers, the protesters against nuclear proliferation, the veterans of the International Hotel Tenants Association, the artists of the Kearny Street Workshop, and the Maoists of the Chinese Progressive Association. The kaleidoscopic cast of historical and fictional figures encompasses a gay Chinese poet, a Japanese American Black Panther acolyte, a Filipino migrant worker and union activist, a Native American Vietnam War veteran, and a Samoan who escapes being arrested by the police for illegal fishing.

Most chapters contain a local, national, and international coordinate, linking California and elsewhere stateside and in the Third World, and connecting people of miscellaneous stripes. For example, in the first chapter, set in 1968, a Chinese boy's father drops dead on Grant Avenue during the Chinese New Year; Martin Luther King, Jr. is assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee; and the Tet Offensive makes headlines. Just as the demise of King – the symbol of nonviolence and integration – leads to the hardening of the Black Power movement, the debacle in Vietnam reminds Asian Pacific Americans of the discrimination against them in the United States and crystallizes the Yellow Power Movement. Paul, the orphaned Chinese boy, is symbolic of the many Americans bereft after the assassinations of King and Bobby Kennedy, their spiritual and political leaders. Affinities are also forged among New World Asian activists and other ethnic contingents, particularly the Black Panthers. Yamashita tracks the emerging Afro-Asian alliance and fissure, along with other attempts at political coalitions, during the turbulent decade. Although the many groups that rally to save the I Hotel fail to prevent the tenants from being evicted in 1977, the movement succeeds in bringing divergent constituencies together. Toward the end the narrator explains how the hotel has become a symbol of Asian Pacific and multiracial activism, of unity amid palpable disparities.

Unlike the other works in this section, which incorporate many details from lived realities, an imaginary frame surrounds Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *One Amazing Thing*.<sup>9</sup> Its nine characters – an Indian graduate student, an African American ex-soldier, a Chinese grandmother and her teenage granddaughter, an Indian officer and his secretary, a Muslim American man, and a Caucasian couple – are trapped in a passport and visa office at an Indian consulate after a massive earthquake. Although the city remains unnamed, one can infer from the thinly veiled allusions to a famous university and the Bay Bridge that the setting is the San Francisco Bay Area. At first the visa office workers and applicants eye one another with prejudice and suspicion. When conflicts erupt and rescue seems remote, the graduate student, who has been reading Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, proposes that each person recounts "one amazing thing" in their life to diffuse tension and distract the group from their anxiety.

Their individual narratives, in contrast to the fictional frame, are very much grounded in sociopolitical reality. For instance, the Chinese grandma reminisces about falling in love with an Indian in the Chinese quarter of Calcutta and being forced to leave India on account of the 1962

Sino-Indian War; FBI agents arrest the Muslim American's father after the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center, inducing a fatal stroke later. Together the vignettes illuminate how personal experiences are caught up in the riptides of history and how storytelling can bridge differences by revealing the stinging secrets buried in the human heart.

#### Tripping across Racial Borders in Southern California

Hisaye Yamamoto's memoir "A Fire in Fontana" and Ty Pak's historical fiction "The Court Interpreter" end respectively with the 1965 Watts Riots and the 1992 Los Angeles uprising; what precedes both urban upheavals is the reckless killing of African Americans.<sup>10</sup> After a hate crime in Fontana the Nisei writer feels deepening empathy with the black victims. Pak's Korean narrator, on the other hand, sides with the Korean grocer who shot a black teenager in the back and whose acquittal, along with that of the officers who beat Rodney King, unleashes the 1992 Los Angeles uprising. Guilt plagues both the Japanese American author and the Korean American narrator, the former for her inability to foil the crime and the latter for his role in extenuating the grocer's lethal act.

In "A Fire in Fontana," the author tells how she unwittingly has been burnt "black." Yamamoto, a Nisei born in 1921 in Redondo Beach, California, was interned in a detention camp in Poston, Arizona during World War II. After the war she worked from 1945 to 1948 as a staff writer for the *Los Angeles Tribune*, a black weekly. This memoir revisits an incident she has to "report" for the *Tribune* in 1945, shortly after the war. It concerns a young black man named Short, who appears at the editorial office one day to inform the staff that he has been getting threatening notes from his white neighbors ever since buying a house in Fontana. He hopes to enlist the *Tribune*, along with other black newspapers, to muster support for his right to live in the white neighborhood. Later that week his house goes up in flames, killing Short, his wife, and their two children. The police close the case by assuming that Short set the fire himself. Yamamoto, convinced of the contrary, blames herself as a journalist for her failure in preventing the hate crime. Twenty years later, the unspooling of the 1965 Watts rebellion on television revives her memory of the 1945 tragedy. To her, who has been gnawed by remorse in the intervening years, the urban violence in Watts seems to be a repercussion of the earlier wrong. Her visceral account evinces the importance of overcoming debilitating silence in the face of social iniquities. By memorializing the fire in Fontana, albeit

decades later, she has ensured that this heinous crime will never be forgotten.

"The Court Interpreter," a thinly veiled fictional rendering of Soon Ja Du's shooting of Latasha Harlins in 1991, is told from the perspective of the court interpreter for the Korean grocer, renamed here Moonja Joo. The narrator deplors the shooting of the black girl, but takes umbrage at the way the national media and the African American press lump together all Korean Americans as repugnant. He decides to help the defendant during the trial by making her *sound* educated and eloquent. Later, he believes his superb performance as court interpreter accounts for the defendant's lenient sentence. The fictional trial is followed by a concatenation of events including the controversial police-brutality trial over the beating of motorist Rodney King, the acquittal of the four white police officers involved, and the ensuing conflagration that engulfs Los Angeles, in which the narrator's brother-in-law is killed. The story magnifies the various obstacles to sound judgment, most notably racial stereotypes, reciprocal prejudice, the burden of representation that racial minorities shoulder, and print and visual media's inflammatory role. The interpreter, who has intentionally mitigated the grocer's culpability during the trial, experiences a blackout during the insurrection, overwhelmed by his own complicity.

Russell C. Leong and Marilyn Chin also use first-person points of view to register the crosscultural encounters of their narrators, a gay middle-aged Chinese American man and an elderly Chinese female immigrant respectively.<sup>11</sup> Leong's narrator in "No Bruce Lee," a 44-year-old Chinese American aging alcoholic, has taken a Welshhire bus to the Greyhound station downtown, where he meets an African American man in a seedy bar on Sunset Boulevard. Mutual stereotyping accounts for both the incipient romance that results in a one-night stand and the distrust and recrimination the morning after. The black customer calls himself Brother Goode and the narrator "Bruce" after Bruce Lee, and other exotic images about Orientals roll off his tongue. The narrator soon becomes so inebriated that he has to be taken to a hotel by his black companion, who spends the night with him. Upon getting up, the narrator looks for his wallet and counts the bills, ticking off Goode, who tells the narrator disdainfully that after all he is "No Bruce Lee." Through the use of color imagery Leong intimates that skin pigmentation is misleading, that no one should be judged according to complexion alone.

A much more upbeat portrayal of interracial bonding is found in Marilyn Chin's "Monologue: Grandmother Wong's New Year Blessings," which

tracks the phenomenal friendship between a Chinese grandma and three other elderly women of disparate ancestry. All four of them are intrepid grandnies. In addition to raising twin granddaughters by herself, Grandma Wong runs a Chinese restaurant that employs workers and serves customers of sundry nationalities. During the Chinese New Year she asks the reluctant twins to drive her to visit her three dear friends. Mrs. Faith, a refugee from Sudan, raises two grandchildren whose parents have been slaughtered by the Janjaweed. Mrs. Wong gives her a big cleaver in the hope of dispelling her recurrent nightmares about the massacre. Mrs. Maria Gonzalez cares for four grandchildren so her daughter can work two jobs during the day and attend college at night; she lives in an apartment complex filled with drug addicts and wakes up at 3 a.m. to make a thousand Mexican dumplings to sell at market. Mrs. Wong gives her a bottle of tiger-bone wine to boost her energy. Mrs. Goldstein, an affluent Holocaust survivor, is dying of cancer; she worries about her grandson Benny, whose father has divorced a good Jewish wife and fallen in love with a shiksa. Mrs. Wong brings Mrs. Goldstein her favorite dish from the restaurant and promises to keep an eye on Benny after Mrs. Goldstein's death. The story, at once hilarious and poignant, highlights the extraordinary mingling of immigrants in Southern California and commemorates the resilience of the elderly whose checkered life histories allow them to identify across race and class.

Among the works discussed in this chapter, Nina Reyoy's *Southland* unfolds against the longest duration, shifting back and forth through five decades, from 1942 to 1994.<sup>12</sup> The novel focuses on the mystery surrounding the murder of four black boys in a grocery store owned by Frank Sakai in the multi-ethnic Crenshaw district during the Watts Riots of 1965. When Frank dies some thirty years later, his granddaughter Jackie, a lesbian law student, discovers that Frank intended to bequeath his store to someone she doesn't know. In the process of finding out who that beneficiary is, she stumbles upon the fact that four boys were found frozen to death in Frank's meat locker. Jackie tries to solve the puzzle with James Lanier, an African American worker in a social service center in Crenshaw. They learn about the interracial liaison between Jackie's grandfather and the mother of one of the murdered boys. Part mystery, part urban fiction, *Southland* probes into the historical significance of the variegated Crenshaw neighborhood in shaping race relations, Frank's ambivalence in serving as a Japanese American soldier during World War II, the self-hatred of a black policeman, and the dilution of Jackie's ethnic identity as her folks move up the economic ladder.

The personal quest of Jackie, who has grown up in suburban Los Angeles and who has drifted away from her grandfather, involves venturing into a new neighborhood and being enlightened by successive crosscultural encounters. After Frank's death, Jackie ends her lukewarm love affair with a Jewish woman who is indifferent to social inequalities. By contrast, her friendship with James deepens and she also becomes drawn to a progressive Japanese American social worker. By reopening the murder case, Jackie unearths not only the secrets of her family past but also a forgotten chapter of Los Angeles — a time when the Crenshaw district was a multiracial hub, a far cry from the highly segregated metropolis today. By the end of the novel, it is this racially integrated LA that Jackie wishes to reclaim as home.

The tapestry of faces in this chapter furnishes a rainbow cross section of California through Asian American lenses. Unsettling memories and vivid racial preconceptions stalk all the characters and render tenuous their footholds on the West Coast. The Korean, Filipino, and Vietnamese newcomers are haunted by a sense of simultaneous geography — by a superimposition of the Asian cultural landscape on their American experience. *Clay Walls* documents Haesu's double exile. *The Gangster of Love* and *American Son* reflect the colonial and neocolonial legacies of the Philippines. Awash in American pop culture and Hollywood ideals, Rocky and the Sullivan brothers hanker in vain after the image, glory or fortune celebrated in the U.S. media. Rocky's rock band falls through the cracks in the black and white counterculture. Tomas and Gabe try to live like the Joneses in Westside suburbs by acquiring wealth and consumer goods illegally. The transplanted family in "The Gangster We are All Looking For" suffers repeated evictions in San Diego. Viet in "Quiet As They Come" is perceived as an inarticulate Vietnamese refugee despite his multiple advanced degrees from another shore. Kal in "Show and Tell" is denounced by a classmate as a Viet Cong when his own father has died in a Viet Cong reeducation camp. The last two stories nevertheless end with a gesture of friendship, offered by a black worker and a white classmate respectively.

Gus Lee, William Poy Lee, Kingston, Yamashita, and Divakaruni all envision the possibility of building an inclusive community in the San Francisco Bay Area. Kai in *China Boy* survives a violent boyhood in the Panhandle through taking boxing lessons from instructors of diverse descent, who take him under their wing. William in *The Eighth Promise* finds sustenance and a sense of belonging in successive "villages" with mixed populations: SF Chinatown, the San Francisco General Hospital, City Lights Books, Galileo School, and Il Piccolo Cafe. Wittman in

*Tripmaster Monkey* assembles a hummingous theater troupe that accommodates amateurs of all colors, ages, and political persuasions. Similarly, a movement that cuts across ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and nationality mobilizes the activists in *I Hotel*. The nine pilgrims in *One Amazing Thing* learn to pool their resources in their effort to survive a devastating earthquake; their separate stories uncover hidden links among people who hail from dispersed geographical locales.

Compared with the works set in the Bay Area, the Southern California counterparts, with the exception of Marilyn Chin's "Monologue: Grandmother Wong's New Year's Blessings," paint a dimmer picture of race relations, exposing mutual prejudices and structural inequalities that erupt in hostile behavior and urban strife. Leong's "No Bruce Lee" and Pak's "The Court Interpreter" manifest reciprocal stereotypes' splintering effects. Just as the Chinese American's distrust of his black escort brings their relationship to a bitter halt, the Korean grocer's suspicion of a black teenager leads to a senseless killing and xenophobic retaliation. Depicting atrocious hate crimes in which the perpetrators go unpunished, Yamamoto's memoir and Revoyr's novel show how the wounds of the past continue to bleed into the present. Through Yamamoto's strong identification with blacks, Jackie's friendship with Lanier, as well as Grandma Wong's solicitude for her three elderly friends, we also see the special opportunities for reaching out to the Other in Southland.

Whether set in Northern or Southern California, individual quests are embedded in the broader canvass of historical drama, social movement, or urban unrest. While focusing on specific characters and their encounters with people of dissimilar ethnicities, the authors address issues that potentially affect everyone. Along with the characters we are taken for many a ride – from shore to shore, from coast to coast, and especially up and down the West Coast – and given close-up glimpses into interracial encounters that lead to empathy or misunderstanding, communal art or protracted silence, that galvanize a broad-based coalition or explode in a firestorm. It is up to the passengers, the authors seem to imply, to forestall a Californian apocalypse.

#### Notes

1. The curricular reform took place in response to both the post-Civil Rights efforts to desegregate education and the demographic shift caused by the arrival of Third World immigrants and refugees. Because of the proliferation of works by writers of Asian descent subsequently, there are many more texts set in

- California than I am able to cover, such as Frank Chin, *Gunga Din Highway* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1995); Seshu Foster, *Angry Days* (Los Angeles: West End Press, 1987); Wakako Yamachi, *Songs My Mother Taught Me: Stories, Plays, and Memoir* (New York: Feminist Press, 1994). I have also omitted Cynthia Kakohara's *In the Heart of the Valley of Love* and Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*, which are covered in Lynn Teagaki's chapter. I warmly thank Russell Leong and my research assistants Hannah Nahm and Robert Kirakos Smith for their valuable suggestions.
2. Ronyoung Kim, *Clay Walls* (Sag Harbor, NY: Permanent Press, 1986).
3. Jessica Hagedorn, *The Gangster of Love* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1996); Brian Ascalon Roley, *American Son* (New York: Norton, 2001).
4. Kenu H. Karrak, "South Asian American Literature," *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, ed. King-Kok Cheung (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 201.
5. Lê Thi Diem Thuy's "The Gangster We Are All Looking For," *The Best American Essays* (Boston: Houghton, 1999); *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (New York: Anchor-Random House, 2003), 78–107.
6. Angie Chau, "Quiet as They Come," *Quiet as They Come* (New York: Ig Publishing, 2010), 68–81; Andrew Lam, "Show and Tell," *Birds of Paradise Last* (Pasadena, CA: Red Hen Press, 2013), 21–32.
7. Gus Lee, *China Boy* (New York: Penguin/Plume, 1991); William Poy Lee, *The Eighth Promise: An American Son's Tribute to His Taiwanese China-Born Mother* (New York: Rodale, 2007).
8. Maxine Hong Kingston, *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1987, New York: Vintage, 1990); Karen Tei Yamashita, *I Hotel* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2010).
9. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *One Amazing Thing* (New York: Hyperion, 2010).
10. Hisaye Yamamoto, "A Fire in Fontana," 1985; *Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories*, revised and expanded edition (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 150–157; Ty Pak, "The Court Interpreter," *Moonbay* (New York: Woodhouse, 1999), 89–117.
11. Russell C. Leong, "No Bruce Lee," *Phoenix Eyes and Other Stories* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 145–153; Marilyn Chin, "Monologue: Grandmother Wong's New Year Blessings," *Revenge of the Mooncake Yxeri: A Manifesto in 41 Tales* (New York: Norton, 2009), 39–47.
12. Nina Revoyr, *Southland* (New York: Akashic Books, 2003).