Landmarks in Literature by Asian American Lesbians

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FOR FUN THE OTHER DAY a lesbian colleague and I tried to rattle off as many names of U.S. lesbian writers as we could, limiting ourselves to the years between 1960 and 1980. In a few minutes, we came up with fifteen names, but although we listed white, Jewish, and African American women and Latinas, we could not come up with even one Asian American.¹

Asian American lesbians have had many reasons for silence. We are relative latecomers to the lesbian/gay writing scene, in part because it has taken us a long time to declare ourselves as lesbians. In the early 1980s, Kitty Tsui emerged as one of our few published writers and role models, and some of us exalted her fire-breathing poems, as if they—actually having appeared in print—were better proof of our existence than our own flesh and blood could ever be. In The Words of a Woman Who Breathes Fire (1983), a collection of poetry and prose, Tsui offered us an image of a proud, defiant, “no bullshit” woman, the dyke we all wanted to be:

i am not afraid of
talking back to those
who presume to know
who i am

Mona Oikawa and Milyoung Cho provided helpful insights for this essay.

¹ During the extensive process of revising this piece to address the many valid questions raised by the special issue editors, I frequently wondered whether I was the right person to do this piece. After all, just because I am an Asian American dyke does not mean that I have read everything any Asian American dyke ever has written. I see this essay as a place for me to put forth political insights that I have developed over the years in my work as a publisher and activist and, thus, to make some small contribution toward the debates we shall continue to have about the purpose of literature, the direction of the lesbian/gay community, the direction of the Asian American community, and so on.
and telling me that what
i do is not natural...
[From “A Celebration of Who I Am” (62)]

Tsui’s writing reflected her discovery that, as a matter of survival, she
must assert her multiple identities as a Chinese American lesbian. Signif-
ically, her book appeared at a time that a loose network of Asian Amer-
can dykes was finally organizing itself in enclaves across the nation, from
San Francisco to New York City. By the time I considered myself a
card-carrying member somewhere in the mid-1980s, the network of in-
dividuals was practically a “movement,” sponsoring newsletters and pot-
lucks and softball leagues on a regular basis and going public with decla-
ration of our independence from men and celebrations of our love for
women.

Often, we risked family ties—for those of us raised in white suburbs,
our families are sometimes our only link to our Asian heritage—in the
hope of finding a truer family in the lesbian and gay community we were
creating. We saw Tsui as part of our movement, a writer who was ours—
and indeed she was. In asserting her multiple identities against a society
resistant to such wholeness, she showed us the rewards of inner strength.
But personal courage alone would not have sustained Tsui, or any of us
for that matter. All of us are brave (to turn a phrase from the black
feminist anthology by Hull, Scott, and Smith [1982]), but all of us also
have depended on the sense of belonging that community—even an emer-
gent one—brings.

Reviewing our literature has made clear to me how critical the
assertion of identity still is to our Asian American lesbian community.²
Twenty-three years have passed since Stonewall, but we are still arguing
merely for the right to exist. We confront not only homophobia but also

² When I agreed to write this essay, I understood that I was agreeing in some way to
represent the Asian American lesbian community. I knew also that I was the only Asian
American writer for this issue. I decided to do the piece despite my awareness of how
problematic these roles were. Asian Americans have been invisible in too many texts,
and I hope to do my part to articulate some of the particularities and complexities of
our experience. This essay is not the “last word” on literature by Asian American lesbi-
ans. It is one essay, by one writer, one attempt to make sense of Asian American lesbian
history as it is reflected back to us in our literature. I have attempted to cast my
thoughts broadly and have taken pains to acknowledge even the writers that I personally
do not feel moved by. I feel a responsibility to acknowledge the positive accomplish-
ments of our community—a community that is harmonious as well as conflicted, cohe-
sive as well as rife with personal animosities and petty rivalries. We are not without
growing pains. Partly for lack of time and space, I have resisted the temptation to drag
out the laundry list of Asian ethnic similarities and differences, as if such a backdrop
would lend more credence to my views. Instead, I will simply refer readers who seek
more comprehensive background information to the historians Ronald Takaki and
Sucheng Chan. (See, e.g., Takaki’s Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian
Americans [New York: Little, Brown, 1990] and Chan’s Asian Americans: An Interpre-
tive History [Boston: Twayne, 1991].)
racism in our struggle for visibility. Much of our activism, and therefore, our writing, continues to be focused on claiming multiple identities and making ourselves whole. This is true in Canada as well as in the United States. Much published writing by Asian lesbians in Canada is revolutionary simply because the lesbian community there, as here, is often erroneously perceived as white. To counter that notion, in spring 1990 works by Asian Canadian women were featured in a special issue of *Fireweed: A Feminist Quarterly*. Titled “Awakening Thunder,” the issue included pieces by writers for whom their lesbian identity is a focal point. Nila Gupta, a South Asian lesbian, dedicates a love poem to her compatriot:

we meet  
where the three seas meet  
and braid hair  
at Kanniyakumari  
where we are  
our bodies  
laughing  
together  
gentle waves  
lapping  
rolling  

[From “Love Poem for Sharmini”  
(Fernandez et al. 1990, 24)]

(For readers unfamiliar with Kanniyakumari, the poet explains that it is the southernmost tip of India where three seas meet—the Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal, and the Arabian Sea.)


Although Lee comes out as a lesbian in *Telling It: Women and Language across Cultures* (1990), *Disappearing Moon Café* is not a novel about lesbian life. Nevertheless, more woman-bonding occurs here than in either Kingston’s or Erdrich’s tales. Kae Ying Woo, Lee’s narrator, and Hermia Chow, Woo’s jet-setter college roommate at the Peking Language Institute, are intoxicated with each other. They sneak erotic Chinese classics into the women’s dorm, jump into each other’s beds, and giggle together between gulps of forbidden brandy. One day Hermia declares to Kae, “Women’s strength is in the bonds they form with each other. Say
that you’ll love me forever! The bond between true sisters can’t be broken by time or distance apart! Say that, Kae . . . tell me!” (39). In turn Kae thinks, but does not say, “Why do women always want to dig beneath the surface? . . . Are we not happy enough? Are we looking for more loyalty? More purity?” (39). In that moment, Kae reflects the ambivalence I sometimes feel about the intensity of bonds I have had with women, although at other times I find myself believing such bonds to be exactly what I am looking for.

Even if Sky Lee’s writing career soars, as I hope, we need to continue developing our own specifically lesbian venues, where being lesbian is neither secret nor taboo, and where we can freely explore our own experiences. In the meantime, I believe the Asian American feminist community (including our writers) is making progress against homophobia.\(^3\) The anthology *The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian American Women’s Anthology*, edited by Shirley Geok-lin Lim and others (1989), includes several pieces by lesbians. Although, sadly, Lim’s introduction makes no mention of these pieces, they are nevertheless an integral part of the collection. One piece, an erotic lesbian sex poem by Merle Woo, not only breaks the silence about lesbians but also breaks a silence about sex that has traditionally existed in Asian American culture.

My legs around that great horse’s neck not riding
but my body singing down under
in front of the beautiful dark head
feeling her moist tongue in my center—
I am risking my life for these moments
My head possibly dashed against the rocks. . . .

[From “Untitled” by Merle Woo
(Lim et al. 1989, 131)]

As the Asian American population grows, so does the market for books for, by, and about Asian Americans. The large publishing houses are consequently recognizing more and more Asian American writers, most of them women. Finally, by 1992, in addition to Chinese American

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\(^3\) In my experience, the Asian American community is indeed confronting its homophobia. That is not to say that all Asian Americans love that I am lesbian or that they recognize how deep sexuality goes in shaping our world; it just means that I no longer feel as though I will be lambasted as “decadent and bourgeois” as I have been by Asian American leftists in past years. In recent years, the panels on Asian American community building that I have joined seem to have accepted the need to discuss gender and sexuality. It is in my mind important to recognize this minirevolution and then to state the ways in which homophobia must be further eradicated. Ultimately, I feel an investment in making space for myself, and my lesbian and gay compatriots, within the Asian American community.
Amy Tan (1989), we also had discovered Japanese American Cynthia Kadohata (1989) and Filipina American Jessica Hagedorn (1990).

Depending on whom you ask, these writers range from straight-laced and corporate to quasi-radical, but as far as I know, none of these writers is lesbian, an identification which is still highly unacceptable to the mainstream press. The lack of lesbian writers, I would argue, has at least as much to do with our own literary inexperience as it does with the economics and politics of book publishing. Four years after Tsui published *Words of a Woman*, a group of young Asian/Pacific writers from Santa Cruz, California, self-published an anthology, *Between the Lines* (Chung, Kim, and Lemeshevsky 1987). I never had a chance to review the book back then; belatedly, I send them three cheers. While the five-page bibliography of works by, for, or about Asian American lesbians compiled by Alison Kim is definitely worth noting, the prose filling the rest of the collection is excruciatingly earnest. Evidently, the self-publishing route allowed these writers to have a voice without the guidance (or burden) of an editor, whereas ideally a publishing house could have both provided them with a supportive editor and allowed them a strong voice.

I doubt Chung and her compatriots had many options other than to self-publish. The industry’s mainstream is still plagued by sexism, racism, classism, and homophobia. Alternative publishers need to continue to search out Asian American women writers whose feminist and lesbian experiences explicitly influence their work. Because of our community building and the efforts of a few committed and independent publishers, we do have work by novelists Chea Villanueva (*China Girls*, 1991) and Willyce Kim (*Dancer Dawkins and the California Kid*, 1984); playwright/performer Canyon Sam (“The Dissident” and “Taxi Karma,” both unpublished); poet/essayists Tamai Kobayashi and Mona Oikawa (*All Names Spoken*, a collection of pieces by these two Japanese Canadians, 1993); and a host of other emerging writers. Many Asian lesbians are represented in *Piece of My Heart: A Lesbian of Color Anthology* edited by Makeda Silvera (1991). This groundbreaking collection reflects an inspiring vision of community where women of color speak “sister to sister,” sharing everything from coming out/coming home stories to favorite recipes.

This list of fictional works that portray Asian American lesbian life is short. But other developments give me hope for our literary future. Two new publications are likely going to produce new writing. The first, initiated by Los Angeles–based Ingin Kim, is a yet unnamed periodical with a gritty, underground feel and absolutely no editorial guidelines, geared specifically toward Asian Pacific lesbians and bisexual women. In her call for submissions, Kim states: “Asian/Pacific women are often prone to serious self-censorship. That’s a problem because it continues
our invisibility. This publication promises to be loud and out there—
stressing the quirky, experimental, irate, and provocative. Think of it as
a journal or a 'zine or a document of our times.” Indeed, Kim’s desire to
expand the genres available to us is a reasonable response to the disturb-
ing lack of published works among us. The second, New York City–based
COLORLife! The Lesbian, Gay, Twospirit, and Bisexual, People of
Color Magazine, is a more sober, hard-hitting publication that is not
exclusively Asian but that will likely have its proper share of Asian les-
bian writers.4

Our literature has everything to do with the state of the lesbian/gay
movement. Asian American lesbians are becoming more visible and more
diverse. The San Francisco Bay Times regularly lists meetings of South
Asian, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Japanese lesbians. In the Los Angeles
Times Magazine feature on “lipstick lesbians” in Spring 1992, I spotted
a striking photo of an Asian dyke on a flashy motorcycle. Though while
mounted atop a Harley Davidson she may not represent the height of
community activism, I found it comforting to have yet more evidence that
we are everywhere; that some of us are wild; and that not all of us have
confined ourselves to well-behaved poetry readings or to the stuffy pages
of prestigious academic journals.

Our community of writers is changing too. I was one of the organizers
of OutWrite ’92, the third National Lesbian and Gay Writers Conference
held in Boston in March. There we convened what I believe is one of the
first major groups of gay, lesbian, and bisexual writers of Asian heritage.
We are still debating what to call ourselves—the hybrid term Asian
American does not work for everyone—and our gatherings remain too
often dominated by East Asians, with not enough representation by
South Asians or Southeast Asians or even by Asian Americans of mixed
backgrounds.5

In their review of the conference for the Nation, Jan Clausen and
Andrea Freud Loewenstein observed, “Now that we finally understand
the stakes, we are writing as though it matters” (1992). I believe this
holds true for the state of Asian American lesbian writing. I have no
doubt that we are committed. I am not sure, though, what we are com-
mitted to. I believe we need to push ourselves beyond the politics of
identity and develop a political agenda based on our vision of a free and

4 COLORLife! is looking for contributors; contact the Cairo Project, P.O. Box
1518, Ansonia Station, New York, N.Y. 10023.
5 We need still to interrogate and subvert hierarchies based on ethnicity, class, and
gender within the Asian American community. In my view, identity-based politics falls
short of addressing this need. Often, ethnic hierarchies are intertwined with class differ-
ences, cultural prejudices, or religious biases. In mixed queer settings, such as the Asian
American meeting at OutWrite ’92, lesbians occasionally express frustration with the
sexism and misogyny of some gay men.
just world. After all, telling the world who we are should not be the be-all and end-all of our work. What we plan to do and how and why (as writers, readers, and publishers) should definitely receive at least as much scrutiny as what race we represent and who we sleep with.

As writers, we need to wrap our minds around the other issues our literary communities face: teaching lesbian/gay writing in heterosexual academic environments; race and problems of representation; the role of writers in shaping the lesbian/gay movement; the moral dimensions of writing about sex; the politics of book reviewing; and so on. We have come a long way since Tsui first breathed her "words of fire." New challenges face us. Now, in addition to our struggles for personal wholeness and political visibility, we should think constructively about the rest of society and how we are going to create peace, justice, and sexual freedom in our lifetimes.

South End Press
Boston

References


Hull, Gloria T., Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith. 1982. All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave. Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press.


6 I have edited an anthology titled The State of Asian America: Contemporary Activism and Resistance (1993), in which I put forth my critique of identity politics and my thoughts as to where the Asian American community should be headed. I realize that many of the points I make here and elsewhere will provoke debate—e.g., my belief that identity politics is worth challenging on theoretical grounds, even if material conditions make our liberation only a dream, because theory shapes action (as well as the other way around). Indeed, as an activist rather than as an "expert," I am electing to engage such debate, hoping that some reader more knowledgeable than I will take the time to respond to my views.


