Cathy J. Schlund-Vials, Linda Trinh Vô and K. Scott Wong, eds., Keywords for Asian American Studies
Crystal Parikh and Daniel Y. Kim, eds. The Cambridge Companion to Asian American Literature

Izabella Kimak
Two recent publications, *Keywords for Asian American Studies* and *The Cambridge Companion to Asian American Literature*, both published in 2015 by New York University Press and Cambridge University Press, respectively, constitute scholarly attempts at encompassing the most crucial developments that have taken place within the field of Asian American studies in the last few decades. These new publications follow in the footsteps of such seminal titles as Elaine H. Kim’s 1982 *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* or *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, edited by King-Kok Cheung and published in 1997, both of which tried to map the contours of Asian American literature in their respective decades. Kim’s study shared the tendency of much early Asian American scholarship to center on the experiences and cultural productions of East Asians, particularly the Chinese and Japanese, while Cheung’s collection attempted to be more inclusive with chapters devoted to South Asian American or Vietnamese American writing. Yet, as time passes and new developments occur, it is necessary to periodically rethink what Asian American studies and Asian American literature are, and this is precisely what the two reviewed books endeavor to do.

*Keywords for Asian American Studies* is an alphabetically organized collection of sixty-one short entries on the most crucial concepts that have shaped the field of Asian American studies. As the editors explain in the introduction to the volume, their
intention was to give the readers a sense of the evolution of the field since its inception in the wake of the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 70s to the present day, when Asian American studies programs constitute an integral part of university curricula across the United States. Thus, the editors invited scholars representing diverse fields—including humanities, cultural and social studies—to produce a collection whose heterogeneity and multidisciplinarity would be a reflection of the heterogeneity and multidisciplinarity of the field itself. Including both foundational keywords—such as “identity,” “immigration,” “assimilation” or “ethnicity”—as well as more recently emergent terms—such as “media” or “globalization”–the volume attempts to represent the way in which the field of Asian American studies responds to the changes in the world at large. Two terms remain crucial for each of the articles in the collection, though. These are “Asian” and “American” that function as “an implicit point of entry” (4) for all the contributors, who need to address the charged character of these terms.

The entries that may stir particular interest, especially when read against one another, are those that address the tensions and discontinuities inherent in the field of Asian American studies. For example, Linda Trinh Võ in her entry on “Community” points out the problematic character of the pan-ethnic Asian American label, which may lead to the erasure of the differences between various Asian nationalities, even if its coinage was fueled by a desire to present Asian Americans as a coherent group with the view to gaining for them some political power. By a similar token, Nitasha Tamar Sharma in her entry on “Brown” addresses the hierarchical organization of Asian American studies; the priority it initially gave to East Asians paved the way for the embracing of the label “Brown” by many Asian Americans who felt excluded from the—in itself problematic—label “Yellow,” associated with East Asians. Still, some of the entries included in the collection are in themselves a reflection of this lingering tendency to prioritize East Asians. To give an example, Evelyn Hu-Dehart’s entry on “Diaspora” focuses almost exclusively on the experiences of the Chinese, despite some general remarks the author makes about diasporas at large. While in other entries the focus on one nationality may be justified by the subject matter—for example, Lane Ryo Hirabayashi’s entry on “Incarceration” for obvious reasons concentrates on the Japanese Americans in light of their massive internment during World War II—in the case of Hu-Dehart’s article one would welcome more attention given to the diasporic experiences of other Asian groups apart from the Chinese.

Many of the entries in the collection take as their starting point a dictionary definition of the concept in question to proceed to analyze the term’s import for Asian American studies in particular. Quite a few of the concepts analyzed in the book would naturally be applicable to other minorities as well—for example, “deportation,” “law” or “race.” The inclusion of other concepts may, on the other hand, come as a surprise to the reader—for example, “environment” and “health”—as typically little attention is given to them in the context of Asian American studies. At other times, the reader’s expectations concerning the term in question may be challenged. For instance, Daryl Joji Maeda’s entry on “Movement” focuses not on mobility, which is what one may expect given the history of Asian migration to the US, but on Asian American political activism. What is noteworthy, there are several concepts whose recurrence in many of the entries testifies to their centrality in articulating Asian American consciousness; these are, to name just a few, transnationalism, intersectionality, and Orientalism. Offering insights into the
history of Asian presence in the United States, particularly since the second half of the nineteenth century, the volume likewise documents new developments in theoretical stances (e.g. the entries on “Gender” and “Queer”) and the changes in the world at large (e.g. the entry on “Media,” with its discussion of the Asian Americans’ deployment of new digital media to challenge stereotypical representations of Asians as alien others, or the one on “Terrorism,” with its focus on the post-9/11 US).

If through its multifaceted and nuanced analysis of the field’s key concepts Keywords for Asian American Studies encourages the reader to approach the field of Asian American studies from various critical perspectives, The Cambridge Companion to Asian American Literature is based on a somewhat different premise. Acknowledging the so-called transnational turn in Asian American studies as well as the changing notions of ethnic identity, the latter volume attempts to offer a more comprehensive overview of typically Asian American literary genres and literary concerns. Preceded by a chronology of major works and events in the history of Asian American literature from 1763 to the present, the volume’s fifteen chapters authored by prominent scholars in the field are divided into four thematic sections.

The first one, titled “Formations of Asian America: Immigration, Empire, Law,” comprises three essays that delve into the foundation of Asian American literature and the role played thereof by American imperialist and domestic policies. In Chapter One, “Asian American Literature within and beyond the Immigrant Narrative,” Min Hyoung Song points to the struggles of American writers of Asian descent with the expectations of what they ought to write about as Asian Americans and with the label of an Asian American author itself. Song discusses one of the most prevalent literary genres associated with Asian America, that of immigrant narrative, which is currently being challenged and refused by many second-generation Asian American writers. Chapter Two, “America’s Empire and the Asia-Pacific: Constructing Hawai’i and the Philippines” by Denise Cruz and Erin Suzuki, analyzes the works of such influential early writers as Felicidad Ocampo, José Garcia Villa and Carlos Bulosan as well as more contemporary authors who in their works address the history of the US presence in their respective areas. Kandice Chuh and Karen Shimakawa’s “Adjudicating Asian America” is in turn an analysis of the role played by American legal system in the exclusion and regulation of Asianness from the mid-nineteenth century court cases that tried to “determine what Asianness is in relation to the categories of blackness and whiteness” (32) to the post-9/11 legal backlash against Arab Americans and South Asian Americans. Chuh and Shimakawa illustrate the specific laws they discuss with examples of literary representations of the consequences the implementation of these laws brought.

Part Two, “Asian American Writing and the Legacy of War,” begins with Greg Robinson’s essay “Writing the Internment,” which proceeds chronologically from wartime and postwar to present-day internment literature, authored by both Japanese and white writers, produced with adults or children in mind, to argue that while the production and reception of early internment stories was governed by sociological conditions, recent narratives make more creative uses of the internment stories. In Chapter Five, “The Literature of the Korean War and Vietnam War,” Daniel Y. Kim and Viet Thanh Nguyen analyze what they term “works of cultural memory” (60) that are acts
of literary rememberings of two American military interventions in Asia mentioned in
the essay’s title. Finally, Rajini Srikanth in her chapter “‘The War on Terror’: Post-9/11
South Asian and Arab American Literature” focuses on South Asian and Arab American
literary texts that offer a necessary corrective to the US-centric perspective on 9/11
evined by mainstream post-9/11 literature, such as Don DeLillo’s Falling Man or John
Updike’s Terrorist.

By far the largest section of the volume, Part III, “The Extravagance of the
Genre,” comprises essays that focus on genres other than the realist novel and the
autobiography, which are considered the dominant ones of Asian American literature.
Josephine Lee argues in “Asian American Drama” that having “always been tied up with
larger questions of visibility and representation” (90) Asian American drama frequently
takes as its aim the unpacking and debunking of stereotypical, Orientalizing
representations of Asianness. In her chapter on “Asian American Poetry,” Josephine Park
analyzes the work of the Chinese detainees on Angel Island, the Japanese Americans
interned during World War II as well as three contemporary poets—Theresa Hak Kyung
Cha, Meena Alexander and Tan Lin—pointing to the shared feature of these diverse poetic
productions, namely their manifestations of discontent. In Chapter Nine, “Model
Minority Narratives and the Asian American Family,” Erin Ninh engages in the re-reading
of (in)famous narratives of intergenerational conflict—including, among others, Maxine
Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior and Amy Tan’s The Joy Luck Club—that have been
scathingly criticized by Asian American scholars for “selling out” to the mainstream.
Ninh shows that what the subtext of these novels reveals is the economic character of the
intergenerational conflict. In Chapter Ten on “The Writing of Translation,” Christopher
Lee distinguishes two types of translation that pertain to Asian American literature:
intralingual translation, which denotes cross-cultural representation within the same
linguistic system, and interlingual translation, that is translating between different
linguistic systems, in this case from Asian languages into English. Betsy Huang’s “Popular
Genres and New Media” explores the ways in which Asian American writers have in the
new millennium expanded the boundaries of chick lit, crime fiction and science fiction,
correcting some pernicious stereotypes of Asians that especially the latter two genres are
guilty of perpetuating. Huang argues that “popular fiction and new media are the new
playgrounds for Asian American writers, offering vast, devoted fan bases (for broad
audience reach), nonrealist narrative toolboxes (for formal as well as social and
ideological ‘thought’ experiments), and readily accessible digital creative and publishing
apparatuses (for immediate distribution)” (142). The last essay in the section, Hyungji
Park’s “Toward a Definition of Diaspora Literature,” constitutes an attempt to define
diaspora literature against non-diaspora literature, the former “provid[ing] a kind of
resistance to the assimilationist or United States-centered tradition” (156) of the latter.
Park concludes her analysis with the claim that contemporary writers tend to produce
more radical diasporic texts than their predecessors, for whom “inclusion and
membership. . .[were] important values” (157).

As its title “Identities and Postidentities” suggests, the final section of the book is
devoted to explorations of the changing notions of Asian American identity. Helena Grice
and Crystal Parikh’s “Feminisms and Queer Interventions into Asian America” is a survey
of both literary and scholarly texts that foreground gender and sexuality as constructive
of identity. Pointing to the revisions of the Asian American literary canon by women and
LGBT writers as well as to recent theoretical attempts to compensate for “the relative absence of critical attention to the question of sexuality in Asian American Studies” (173) prevalent well into the 1990s, Grice and Parikh conclude that “Asian American feminist and queer interventions uncover how all racial and national formations involve representations of gender and sexuality” (170, emphasis in the original). Joseph Keith in “Comparative Race Studies and Interracialisms” construes alienage as a framework for comparative race approach. On the basis of three canonical Asian American texts—Carlos Bulosan’s *America is in the Heart*, John Okada’s *No-No Boy* and Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange*—Keith proves the usefulness of the alienage category in articulating not only similarity and solidarity but also difference and conflict in interracial relations. The last chapter of the book, Cathy J. Schlund-Vials and Cynthia Wu’s “Rethinking Embodiment and Hybridity: Mixed-Race, Adoptee, and Disabled Subjectivities,” turns to the newly emerging fields of critical mixed-race studies, transracial adoption studies and disability studies that problematize Asian American identity pointing to its heterogeneous and multiplicitous character.

All in all, with their insightful analyses of the most crucial developments in Asian American studies and Asian American literature as well as their impressive bibliographies, both books may function as an excellent entry point for beginners in the field of Asian American studies while at the same time provoking more seasoned Asian American scholars to rethink their own position within and contribution to the field.

---

**AUTHOR**

**IZABELLA KIMAK**

Department of American Literature and Culture, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University,