Asian American literature is traditionally understood as a body of texts written in English that depicts a specific social history in which individuals of various ethnicities have faced discrimination due to perceptions and laws that designated them as aliens. Common narratives involve the troubling acculturation process of the Asian immigrant, the inter-generational ruptures between Asian immigrant parents and their more Americanized children, and the challenges of defining identity when an Asian American travels back to a land of ethnic origin.

Critics tend to further delineate Asian American literature through “maximal ideological inclusiveness” (Lye, “Introduction” 4). This “inclusiveness” appears in the way critics embrace particular cultural productions, based on factors such as ancestry, the author’s residency status, and textual content. Most of the works that have achieved canonical status tend also to depict Asian or Asian American contexts. Certainly, critics understand that American writers of Asian descent are often inspired by their personal experiences of racial oppression and racial difference in the creation of their cultural productions, both fictional and otherwise. Bounding Asian American literature in part by the writer’s ancestry leads not merely to a biologically centered notion of textual classification but to an understanding that race produces material effects on bodies, lives, and corresponding acts of creative expression. The most acclaimed texts exemplify these definitional boundaries. Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1975), reputed to be one of most frequently adopted books in college-level curriculums, focuses on the challenges connected
to Chinese American immigrant assimilation and acculturation. Carlos Bulosan’s *America Is in the Heart* (1946), Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* (1989), and Chang-rae Lee’s *Native Speaker* (1995) respectively explore similar issues from the viewpoints of Filipino American, Indian American, and Korean American narrators. John Okada’s *No-No Boy* (1957) reveals the struggles faced by Japanese Americans during the postinternment period from the perspective of a young man named Ichiro Yamada. These now-classic texts, the subjects of numerous critical articles, book chapters, and required reading on many graduate qualifying exams, can reinforce an assumption that Asian American literature is defined by the overlaps among ethnoracial authorial identity, narration, narrative perspective, and cultural scripts that direct our understanding and analyses of the fictional world.

*Racial Asymmetries* reconsiders this approach. It challenges the tidy links between authorial ancestry and fictional content, and between identity and form, to expand what is typically thought of as Asian American culture and criticism. This book is inspired by a persistent phenomenon: works of fiction that trouble critical methodologies through the storytelling perspective. Take Jessica Hagedorn’s novel *Toxicology* (2011) as one clear example. Hagedorn employs first-person narration to offer readers unobstructed access to the mind and the life of Eleanor Delacroix, an eighty-year-old writer and avowed lesbian who is of Caucasian-Mexican descent. The novel is set in contemporary New York and involves an eclectic set of characters in addition to Eleanor, including a budding filmmaker named Mimi Smith and her daughter Violet. Hagedorn (with Irish, Filipina, Chinese, and French ancestries), like Eleanor, is of mixed-race background, but Eleanor could hardly be called her fictional counterpart or imaginary double. In *Toxicology*, we see Eleanor Delacroix’s fame dwindling in light of the new modes of art and authorship being promoted in the age of digital cultures and the ubiquity of social media technology. Strikingly, the novel does not contain any characters clearly marked as Asian or Asian American. *Toxicology* hence moves away from the Filipino American–centered content of Hagedorn’s first three fictional publications and provides us with a meditation on the shifting morphology of cultural production in a media-saturated new millennium. Hagedorn’s novel demonstrates the “racial asymmetry” at the heart of my book: the author’s ethnoracial status is not easily or directly mirrored within the fictional world. A central aim of *Racial Asymmetries* is to recenter works such as *Toxicology* within Asian American cultural studies, to challenge the standard narrative perspectives,
plots, and devices of the field and to further encourage the development of more expansive social-context methodologies.

*Toxicology* is assuredly not the only text that pushes the bounds of Asian American cultural criticism through narratorial construction. Indeed, this novel is part of a wide-scale emergence of fictional narratives produced roughly within the past two decades. I specifically concentrate on first-person narration to show how Asian American writers engage the invention of dynamic fictional worlds. My book reveals that the construction of narrative perspective encourages cultural critics to engage a highly comparative mode of analysis, which opens up a whole range of texts heretofore facing marginalization. *Racial Asymmetries* examines a selection of such texts, which include Sesshu Foster’s *Atomik Aztex* (2005), Chang-rae Lee’s *Aloft* (2004), Sabina Murray’s *A Carnivore’s Inquiry* (2004) and *Forgery* (2007), Sigrid Nunez’s *For Rouenna* (2001) and *The Last of Her Kind* (2006), Claire Light’s “Abducted by Aliens!” (2009), and Ted Chiang’s *The Merchant and the Alchemist’s Gate* (2007). Such fictions ask readers and critics to develop reading practices that move away from an autobiographical or autoethnographic impulse attuned to authorial ancestry. By doing so, readers and critics remain more open to a range of storytellers including a merchant from the Islamic Golden Age, an American antiquities dealer who travels to Greece in the post–World War II period, a Chicano slaughterhouse worker agitating for union reform in the period following civil rights, a sixty-year-old Italian American man, an African American female prisoner, and even a man who purports to be an alien abductee. This analytical approach pushes critics to consider why these storytelling perspectives are featured, why certain geographies and historical periods are represented, and who gets written out of the plot, among other such issues. While the unconventional narrators employed by these Asian American writers might seem to reject the foundational issues of race and racism that first propelled the field into existence, this study reminds us that aesthetic choices are not somehow free from political ramifications. Thus, we must attend to the ways that a given story is told and how the telling unlocks fictional worlds that radically widen the social contexts of Asian American cultural productions.

It would be premature, however, to suggest that Asian Americanist and ethnic literary critique, as they have traditionally been defined, is no longer needed. We understand that the writer’s racial identity still matters and can be used to categorize a literary body. Nevertheless, if a strategic essentialist approach persists as one of the primary modes
for defining Asian American literature, what then of thinking about the strategic antiessentialism of fictional worlds? I borrow here from George Lipsitz’s conception of strategic antiessentialism as a kind of disguise “on the basis of its ability to highlight, underscore, and augment an aspect of one’s identity that one cannot express directly” (*Dangerous Crossroads* 62). Given the potential propensity to assume that Asian American writers depict only narrative perspectives that overlap with their ethnoracial backgrounds, the aspect of “identity” that cannot be expressed directly is that of the writerly imagination, which cannot be tethered to a single ancestry or origin point. My deployment of strategic antiessentialism thus shifts Asian American cultural criticism outside of its more traditional topics and themes. In this way, strategic antiessentialism offers a paradigm that moves beyond the limits of cultural nationalist models and forefronts a deconstructive critical methodology in which the Asian American writer and his or her nonautobiographical narrator stand at the center.

**Narrative Perspective and the Constitution of Asian American Literature**

One element we need to consider further is the relationship between authorial descent and narrative content, as this link conditions the emergence of specific literary forms. Indeed, twentieth-century narrative texts by American writers of Asian descent generally fall into two aesthetic and formal categories: autobiography/memoir or the ethnoracial bildungsroman (or some variation that melds those two literary genres). The dominance of these two forms is clearly connected to the expansive opportunity both forms provide for telling stories of the Asian American subject, whether in a nonfictional configuration, such as autobiography, or in its fictional valences, as in the ethnoracial bildungsroman. Despite the apparent differences between these two forms, their connection lies in the importance of the narrating subject and corresponding narrative perspective. In the Asian American autobiography and Asian American bildungsroman, narrative cohesion typically results from the maintenance of one narrator or main character, whose life readers follow from the beginning to the end and who *can* or *could* be conflated with the author. Given the centuries-long hostile and dehumanizing caricatures of Asians as yellow perils, model minorities, dragon ladies, and kung-fu masters, self-representation is of
paramount importance. One might call this developmental narrative, as figured in both autobiography and in the ethnoracial bildungsroman, a “racial form” (Lye, America’s Asia 1), precisely because sociohistorical circumstances exert influence on modes of literary expression. The ability of the minority writer to explore his or her life (or someone’s not too dissimilar) in autobiographical or fictional form has thus consistently provided a valuable means to nuance and diversify what we understand as the American experience.

Asian American literature’s emergence through the development of autobiography and the ethnoracial bildungsroman must also be considered alongside its connections to the literary and commercial publishing markets. Especially in the first half of the twentieth century, ethnic writers played the part of the native informant, providing depictions of the so-called authentic Asian American experience. While some authors faced difficulty in reaching a wide audience, commercial interest in the ethnic experience helps explain the appeal of writers such as Etsu Inagaki Sugimoto, Younghill Kang, Jade Snow Wong, C. Y. Lee, and Lin Yutang in the period prior to Maxine Hong Kingston’s monumental work, The Woman Warrior. Indeed, as guides to the American minority experience, these writers negotiated a complicated milieu where literary value was often tied to authenticity. Interest in Asian cultures and oriental objects had been circulating in the United States from as far back as the late seventeenth century, helping create a reading audience receptive to the increased popularization of such writers in the early twentieth.

This authenticity paradigm circumscribes Asian American writers by assuming unification among the author, narrative perspective, and narrative content. For instance, a Chinese American might be presumed to write from the narrative perspective of a Chinese American character. In addition, the corresponding representational terrain is then expected to primarily elucidate Chinese American social contexts. Narrative perspective is therefore often under incredible pressure to exhibit ethnoracial authenticity. An alignment among the writer’s ethnoracial descent, narrative perspective, and content is not in and of itself impoverishing and restrictive, but I am most interested in exploring how and to what ends Asian American writers travel outside and can be read outside of this model.

While American writers of Asian descent have not always remained confined within fictional worlds that mirror their ethnic and racial backgrounds, deviations prior to 1989 are few and far between.
The most well-known writers to flout a more autoethnographically inflected practice are Winnifred Eaton, of Chinese British heritage, who took on an ethnic pseudonym to pen her many Japanese-themed novels, and Diana Chang, author of six novels, many of which do not contain major characters of Asian descent. Eaton and Chang both provide interesting but historically isolated cases for contextualizing the commercial and critical response to ethnoracial narratives at different historical points in the twentieth century. Eaton composed her fictions roughly between 1899 and 1925, while Chang composed hers between 1956 and 1978. Hence, it is difficult to read Eaton and Chang as part of a sustained movement constituting an expansive, nonautoethnographic fictional literary tradition. At the same time, the emergence of such fictions spotlights the complicated relationship between Asian American writers and textual content, especially as themes of racial oppression, migration, and assimilation do not always ground their cultural productions.

While the commercial pressures that reduce Asian American writers to native informants have been in place for at least a century, the contemporary period is exceptional. The commodification of Asian American writers unquestionably continues. The incredible success of Amy Tan in the late 1980s, for instance, inaugurated another sustained wave of literary marketplace racialization, in which the publishing industry codified the Asian American writer as a native informant. But for a number of reasons, the current moment differs from when Eaton and Chang were first published, precisely because of processes related to institutionalization. Asian American studies programs and departments are now found across the United States. In addition, the Immigration Act of 1965 enabled Asian immigrants to enter the United States in considerable numbers for the first time since 1924. This influx set the stage for a new and larger generation of writers. It is no coincidence that nonautoethnographic fictions began to appear en masse in the 1990s, roughly a generation after the Immigration Act. During this latter period, Asian Americans have also been understood as model minorities, a shift in racial formation that must be taken into account to consider the changes occurring in fictional worlds.

Thus, three general historical and sociocultural circumstances frame this project: the emergence of postracial discourse in the model minority era, issues of literary commodification, and the development of critical trends in relation to Asian American writers.
Asian American Fiction in the Postrace Era

The archive of Asian Americans fictions explored in this study, all which were published after 2000, collectively appear in a period in which conversations concerning social inequality have dramatically shifted, especially in relation to the issue of racial oppression. According to Linda Trinh Võ, the “postracial narrative” involves the assumption that the United States has moved “beyond its racist past”; she argues further that this viewpoint “reaffirms the palatable and celebratory multiculturalism, which is devoid of historical context and ignores the complex ways in which racism is embedded in our society. It reflects, in some respects, the way a color-blind society would supposedly operate, by flattening out racial difference” (332). Subsumed within the postracial narrative, Asian Americans appear in a complicated position precisely because they are held up as model minorities, a group that has transcended social inequalities. The model minority myth suggests a narrative of development. Indeed, it upholds the racial minority as evidence of a color-blind democracy and as an example that all Americans can follow. Despite the challenges of immigration, acculturation, and assimilation, Asian Americans, according to this script, somehow still succeed and achieve. This reductive formulation further shows how ethnic and racial difference is not necessarily a barrier, thus showing up (and perhaps even shaming) other racial groups perceived to be underperforming.

The Postracial Aesthetic

Because the Asian American writers in this study take on narrative perspectives or characters that do not mirror their own ethnorracial ancestries, these works might be taken as examples of what the literary critic Yoonmee Chang has called a “postracial aesthetic.” Chang defines the postracial as “literature written by Asian American writers that does not contain Asian American characters or address Asian American experiences” (201–02). Chang engages a lengthier reading of Nam Le’s opening short story from The Boat (2008), “Love and Honor and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice,” to show how the postracial operates through an “ethnic abnegation” (202), as writers turn away from their Asian ethnic backgrounds as direct sources or inspirations for their creative work. Chang asserts that “this rejection frees the author from
the ostensible shackles of ethnic particularity and difference to examine transcendent universal themes, like ‘love and honor and pity.’ For Asian American authors, the postracial more specifically frees them from writing orientalist caricatures and reductive ethnographies—from the ‘Chinatown’ book” (202). Le himself cannot be defined so strictly as Asian American due to his Australian national origin, but the story’s setting in Iowa and its thematic content is more broadly applicable to minority writers. As read by Chang, the main character from the opening short story, presumably modeled on Nam Le himself, is an example of a writer seeking to break free from the bonds of autoethnographic and autobiographical fiction. Le’s collection as a whole seems to follow the pattern of the writer who has broken free from the expectation that he write from his own ethnoracial viewpoint, as many of the stories take on perspectives of racially unmarked characters or those of different ancestral backgrounds from Le (who is of Vietnamese descent). At the same time, the final story, “The Boat,” adheres to a Vietnamese context and engages one of the more common concerns of that ethnic experience by relating the harrowing refugee flight from the homeland in the wake of war. The inclusion and the sequencing of “The Boat” suggests that the postracial aesthetic is itself a questionable fantasy and that some established forms and themes of ethnic-minority writing cannot simply be disregarded as unoriginal or superficially pandering to an audience hungry for the ethnoracially authentic narrative voice.

But the larger problem with any postracial aesthetic is the assumption that constructing “universal themes” ultimately enables a writer, Asian American or not, to ever be free from the “shackles of ethnic particularity and difference.” Even as a writer seems to move beyond narrating a particular story from the viewpoint of a character who strongly mirrors his or her own ancestry, deeper analytical inquiry reveals a fictional world imbued by the often brutalizing forces of power based on material realities and external referents. In other words, universal themes might appear in the fictional world, but always and only alongside very specific social contexts that have always been the concern of cultural critics and scholars involved with race and ethnic studies.

For one concrete example within the realm of Asian American fiction, let us turn to Tony D’Souza’s novel *Whiteman* (2006). The narrator and titular “whiteman,” Jack Diaz, travels to Côte d’Ivoire as a volunteer for Potable Water International (PWI), an international humanitarian aid organization that helps tribal villages find reliable sources of clean drinking water. D’Souza, a biracial Asian American writer, does not
situate the first-person narrative through a storyteller whose ethnora-
cicial background overlaps with his own but rather focuses it through the
main character’s challenging journey surviving in the rural backcoun-
try of West Africa. Whiteman might be seen as exemplary of postracial
Asian American fiction. One could say that D’Souza has freed himself
from the bonds of his own “ethnic particularity” as it relates to the fic-
tional world, giving him the potential grounds to explore more universal
themes. On one level, the novel is very much about the practical applica-
tion of universal themes, especially in relation to human rights. Article
25 of the United Nation’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for
example, drives the goals of many international relief and humanitar-
ian organizations. D’Souza’s fictional organization, PWI, has some clear
real-world analogs such as Global Water, water.org, and Water Health
International, all with similar aims.

But, on another level, even as Jack seeks to advance the aims of uni-
versal human rights, these lofty goals collide with the social contexts of
Côte d’Ivoire. For instance, D’Souza’s construction of the fictional world
demands to be read alongside racial tensions involving the northern and
southern tribes within the nation-state. The regime of biological essence
and racial difference exported into Côte d’Ivoire through the colonial
process is central to the country’s regional tensions, as elucidated by
Ruth Marshall-Fratani (13). Key to Marshall-Fratani’s theorization is
that Ivoirians ultimately appropriated colonial ideologies of race to try to
define what an authentic and essential national subject could be. Because
Côte d’Ivoire is one of the most diverse countries in West Africa, the
attempt to define the authentic Ivoirian subject has been bloody, intense,
and conflicted. Within Whiteman, D’Souza represents this complicated
milieu through the religious tensions existing among various popula-
tions. Not long after settling in the Worodougou region, Jack details the
rift between Côte d’Ivoire’s Muslim northerners and Christian south-
erners as emerging in part through French postcolonial influence; the
resulting clashes over citizenship set the stage for violence over issues of
belonging and racial difference. For the local individuals, national disen-
franchisement occurs in multiple ways, including lack of access to health
care and the unequal distribution of federal funds for vital infrastruc-
ture projects (15). At the same time, Jack’s anger is obvious, and he places
his political investments with those who reside in the Muslim-majority
north. Thus, his commitment to social justice extends far beyond the
desire to install new well pumps and provide clean water. However, given
the chaotic national and international situation, Jack never gets to fulfill
his main goal as a member of PWI. By the time the novel concludes, Côte d’Ivoire’s civil war has begun, and the eight remaining members of PWI must make a perilous journey to a neighboring country to be evacuated. We see how the institution of universal human rights finds unstable grounding in the midst of chaotic nation-state formation.

The novel’s structure further enables one to consider the link between formal conventions and social contexts. *Whiteman* can be considered a “dissensual bildungsroman,” specifically detailing the challenges of developing any “egalitarian imaginary” in a postcolonial and neocolonial Ivoirian context (Slaughter 28). While Jack begins the novel as an ostensible adult, every chapter illustrates how much he must learn in order to adapt to and understand the Ivoirian cultures that surround him, suggesting that he still requires maturation. Despite some acculturation to Côte d’Ivoire over the course of the novel, Jack’s experiences leave him unfulfilled, especially as evidenced by his journeys after he is forced to leave the country. He “wandered another half year around the far reaches of the continent” and “tried, and mostly succeeded, to enter every war-torn nation there was: Burundi, Angola, Congo, Zimbabwe” (D’Souza 278). But Jack finally divulges that he never found what he was “looking for” and finally came “home” (278). This last sentiment reveals the interruption of Jack’s identity quest, a reflection perhaps of his limited power as an individual to effect positive change. If the novel’s setting in Côte d’Ivoire brings with it the residues of its French colonial past, the war-torn nations that Jack later visits gesture to the larger history of European colonization, as Burundi, Angola, Congo, and Zimbabwe were respectively colonized by Germany, Portugal, Belgium, and England. The constructed narrative perspective, the “I” of Jack Diaz, is one haunted by his individual failures and the larger scope of political instability on the African continent.

As race relations collide catastrophically within the postcolonial milieu of Côte d’Ivoire, the novel depicts, without romanticizing, how Jack’s persistent attempts to portray life there are indelibly marked by social inequalities. Though D’Souza does not necessarily choose to narrate the novel from the perspective of a mixed-race South Asian American character, *Whiteman* offers us a storyteller who realizes the shortsightedness of his humanitarian mission in the face of the racial and ethnic tensions embroiling Ivoirian society. If the foundational motivations for social-context methodologies within Asian Americanist critique have been to elucidate the experiences of those who are facing oppression and historical erasure, *Whiteman* certainly fits this purpose, even with its
use of a fictionalized narrative perspective. But my larger point is that D’Souza’s novel is not anomalous. It belongs to a vast archive of Asian American fictions that emerged in what has been called the postrace era, yet it must still be read with an attentive eye to issues of social inequality.

The “Model Minority” in the Postrace Era

Like Hagedorn, D’Souza, and Le, the writers included in this study might be read as pushing for a postracial aesthetic as they take on narrative perspectives of non-Asian American or racially unmarked characters. However, on deeper inquiry, these cross-ethnoracial storytelling viewpoints direct us to consider social inequality in relational, refractive, and comparative formations. That is, Asian American characters or experiences may seem marginal to the plotting, but this marginality is advanced in the service of exploring the multifocal configurations of power. This move away from the autobiographical and autoethnographic storyteller is explained in part by timing: these writers have emerged during a period in which their racial status can be hailed as a marker of privilege. As I mentioned earlier, Americans of Asian descent have been labeled as the “model minority.” This designation distinguishes this racial group from others (such as African Americans, Native Americans, and Chicanos/as) and grants us a way to understand why authorial ancestry still remains a vital component to cultural criticism. The connection between racial formation and literary expression cannot always be directly ascertained, yet contemporary Asian American writers must attend to their creative work in an era in which their status as a minority can be levied as a kind of cultural capital. While many scholars cast light on the problems with the logic of the model minority myth, it still remains a pervasive way to conceptualize Asian Americans.

The model minority narrative emphasizes closure, uplift, and, most of all, the Asian American subject who achieves and succeeds. In this construct, the Asian American becomes, most importantly, a docile minority, one who does not protest and instead obeys the formulation that he or she models for others to follow. The term “model” itself suggests a prototype that can be seamlessly replicated among all the different Asian American ethnic groups, flattening out an incredibly heterogeneous population in terms of class, religion, language, and other such differences. Further still, the model minority mythos is funneled through a particular form of achievement. As the legal scholars Miranda Oshige McGowan and James Lindgren note, Asian Americans are “said
to be intelligent and highly educated, though a large number of them are dismissed as math and science geeks” (335). A number of other scholars such as Frank Wu (40), Jean Yonemura Wing (462), Guofang Li (70), and Debora A. Trypten, Anna Wong Lowe, and Susan E. Walden (440) echo the stereotype that Asian Americans only excel in certain academic areas and occupational fields. As the model minority paradigm functions within a reductive homogeneity, Asian American writers at the center of this study directly undermine this racial formation through the construction of such diverse storytelling perspectives. The practice of decentering the ethnoracial autobiographical voice actively challenges the homogeneity and the inherent prototyping that the model minority myth foregrounds. And of course, as Asian American writers create narrators whose ethnoracial ancestries do not match their own, they make an imaginative artistic leap in the creation of these fictional personages. In this sense, we must attend to the Asian American writer not only as a figure whose works may be read for their multifaceted political valences but also as an artist who can be studied for the mastery and deployment of literary craft.

Emergence of Mixed-Race Studies

It is important to note that the postrace era also overlaps with the development and rise of mixed-race studies, a field that casts attention on the nature of descent. With changes in the US Census that offer individuals the chance to mark one or more boxes to denote ancestry, theorizing racial formation becomes all the more challenging. A number of scholars show that mixed-race Asian Americans face thorny issues related to community inclusion and ancestral ties. Does one identify strictly as Asian American or as a mixed-race American? What does it mean when one attempts to identify only with one ancestral background and not another? These questions generate particular friction with respect to mixed-race Asian American writers, who do not always create narrative perspectives that mirror their manifold ancestries. In the following chapters, I focus on a number of authors—Sesshu Foster, Claire Light, Sigrid Nunez, and Sabina Murray—who hail from mixed-race backgrounds. Like D’Souza’s Whiteman, their fictions cannot be easily tethered to their ancestries. Without an obvious autobiographical center to influence analytical inquiries, such works encourage critics to engage a diverse set of character-narrators and corresponding sociohistorical circumstances.
The Fallacy of Postrace Discourse

The fictions briefly touched on—Hagedorn’s *Toxicology*, Le’s *The Boat*, and D’Souza’s *Whiteman*—and the ones analyzed at length later in this study ultimately expose postracial discourse as a fallacy, but not in such a way as to celebrate racial difference in some sort of superficial multiculturalism. Indeed, such cultural productions engage cross-ethnoral perspectives that allow us to consider both the relational and the asymmetrical nature of social difference and associated inequalities. In *Whiteman*, Jack Diaz’s attempt to identify with the local Ivoirians does not simply come about through his work with PWI, and though we see him struggle to attain a measure of acceptance, his personal problems are effectively contrasted with those of his hard-won friends as they find themselves mired in a bloody civil war. And while Le’s *The Boat* engages various narrative perspectives and characters located all over the globe, unveiling a veritable multicultural tapestry—with stories set in the United States, Vietnam, Australia, Japan, Iran, and Colombia—these depictions target rather weighty topics that do not exalt the richness of ethnic differences. The various stories probe into issues such as refugee flight in the wake of war, systemic poverty in shantytown communities, and racial ideologies that fuel international and local conflict. Finally, Hagedorn’s *Toxicology* draws up a fictional world in which art’s value finds dubious social import in a city focused so much on celebrity sightings and superficial capitalist consumption. At the same time, the novel includes an important minor figure named Agnes, the cousin of one of the main characters, who reminds us that the glitzy veneer of New York City also includes an immigrant underclass of domestic workers and laborers.

Despite my focus on such an idiosyncratic archive, one that has not been the center of much critical attention, let me be clear: I do not believe that the ethnoral bildungsroman and autobiography have become obsolete as forms employed by Asian American writers, nor do I believe that a direct connection between authorial background and narrative perspective somehow results in an impoverished fictional world. For instance, the recent surge of Cambodian American autobiographies relating the experiences of Khmer Rouge survivors clarifies the importance of certain literary forms as a way to give voice to personal histories that have been profoundly altered by trauma and violence. The period following the terrorist attacks on 9/11 saw a substantial rise in cultural productions from South Asian American and Anglophone writers
seeking to expose the rise of racial profiling, especially as anti-Muslim sentiment flared. The years following the Tiananmen Square massacre have also seen the emergence of a new generation of Chinese expatriate writers who have detailed the challenges of living under communist rule. Such developments reveal a field that continues to grow in manifold directions.

Touristing in Asian America

Despite the proliferation of postrace rhetoric, one arena—the contemporary literary marketplace—continues to aggressively promote a form of racial authenticity. As I stated earlier, Asian American writers have often been circumscribed by the expectation that their fictions are composed with their personal and communal histories in mind. Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) exemplifies how an Asian American fiction can be both commercially viable and reductively marketed as a kind of authentic narrative. *The Joy Luck Club* remained on the *New York Times* best-seller list for approximately thirty-three weeks, debuting on April 16, 1989, and finally falling off the list on November 26, 1989. It garnered rave reviews, became a runaway best-seller, and possessed enough popular momentum to be adapted into a mainstream Hollywood movie of the same name directed by Wayne Wang, himself a Chinese American. While the sales figures for *The Joy Luck Club* have varied, most scholars and critics agree that the book has sold more than four million copies (Dong 1205). Tan’s popularity is singular, in spite of comparisons to Maxine Hong Kingston and other prominent Asian American writers, as evidenced by sales figures from comparable periods. To this day, Tan remains one of the few American-born writers of Asian descent to have successfully landed at the top of the *New York Times* best-seller list.

In the second chapter of *Beyond Literary Chinatown* (2007), Jeffrey F. L. Partridge investigates the consequences for writing in the post–Amy Tan era by comparing the book descriptions included on hardcover dust jackets or paperback covers of nine different narrative fictions produced by Chinese American writers, four of which are by Tan. Partridge concludes by arguing that literary marketers engender “the tour guide function” (73) promoting an ethnic authenticity. Yet Partridge chooses not to go beyond the Chinese American authors in exploring the tour guide function, which could demonstrate not only an ethnic commodification but a racialized one. Despite Partridge’s focus on one ethnic group, his
approach persuasively shows how narratives are marketed in relation to authorial identity. Book-jacket descriptions, back-cover plot summaries, and Internet editorial blurbs describing the Chinese past as “hidden,” “tangled,” and “terrible” (73) call attention to an unassimilable origin point. This narrative heightens the inscrutability long attached to Asian American subjects as the yellow peril. While the American present is embraced and in some cases celebrated within these novels, the Asian ethnonational past is far more treacherous to navigate, so much so that many include various first-generation subjects who die. American identity then depends on a jettisoning of the hazardous past. The success of this kind of narrative demonstrates how Chinese American literature becomes commodified through marketplace practices. Such marketing approaches, of course, target what publishers consider a broad audience who will not likely have much familiarity with ethnic-minority contexts. Thus, the appeal of the tour guide narrative unfolds in the context of readers who look to begin a new and dynamic journey offered, apparently, only by the authentic storytelling voice.

This process can be elaborated more broadly within a racial context, as evidenced by the marketing approaches to several other novels not specific to the Chinese experience. The back-cover description to the paperback version of Lan Cao’s *Monkey Bridge* (1997), for example, illustrates how racial authenticity is rehearsed: “Lan Cao’s narrative traverses perilously between worlds past and present, East and West, in telling two interlocked stories” involving, among other things, a mother-daughter relationship and “family secrets.” The summary goes on to note that “the haunting and beautiful terrain of *Monkey Bridge* is the ‘luminous motion,’ as it is called in Vietnamese myth and legend, between generations, encompassing Vietnamese lore, history, and dreams of the past as well as of the future” (emphases mine). The binary that structures East and West is telling, despite the different ethnic context, in which Vietnam stands in for the threatening Asian past. As Partridge details in the case of Chinese American literature, so many of these mother-daughter descriptions are leveraged on a “secret” often detailed or existing in conjunction with an Asian ethnic heritage. The revelation of the secret enables the main character to undergo a kind of healing (73). In *Monkey Bridge*, the daughter, Mai Nguyen, one of two narrators, must confront her mother’s past to find out why her grandfather did not join them in the United States. This “secret” propels the novel forward and requires readers to delve into the traumas of the Vietnam War. *Monkey Bridge* is one of numerous examples external to the Chinese American context.
wherein the writer is marketed as the tour guide. The writer leads readers into the Asian past and then delivers them safely away from it.

The tour guide construct resides in the expectation that the Asian American writer represents his or her ethnic background through the narrative perspective and thus directs the story’s content through his or her position as the storyteller. This parallel is essential because, as Partridge states, “to go into the past to make sense of the present, the Chinese American author must be a part of that past and an emblem of that history” (73). However, if the Asian American author is likened to an “emblem of history,” one is already in danger of conflating the author specifically with historian, autoethnographer, or autobiographer—roles that do not grant the possibility of Asian American creativity and artistry. The storyteller’s ancestry in a novel such as Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* or Cao’s *Monkey Bridge* aligns with the author’s racial and ethnic background. In some cases, the novel’s events can even be corroborated by the author’s own life, therefore invoking elements of autobiography. On another level, the Asian American writer can be called on to provide an account of the past as a sort of layman’s historian. At the same time, the author’s creation often details a larger ethnic community’s characteristics and struggles, with the narrator serving as our gateway into the appropriately authenticated fictional world.

The success of Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* and other blockbuster Asian American works that followed, including Lisa See’s *Shanghai Girls* (2009), Abraham Verghese’s *Cutting for Stone* (2009) and Jamie Ford’s *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet* (2009), helps to strengthen the link between the writer’s Asian ancestry and narrative perspective, thus continuing to fuel the assumption that fiction is a mask for historical, autobiographical, and autoethnographic documentation. What Partridge calls the “literary Chinatown” can be seen as a burden distributed across different ethnic groups that constitute the racial category known as Asian American. I am thus interested in how the literary marketplace helps articulate some of the forces that render the Asian American writer as a native informant and as a hazy double for the narrator and/or protagonist within the fictional world. As we can see, the Asian American fiction writer exists at a complicated historical and cultural nexus. On the one hand, postrace rhetoric implies that the Asian American subject is a mobile entity, free from the bonds of racial prejudice and therefore ostensibly just as free to imagine fictional worlds as devoid of social inequality as his or her own life apparently is. On the other, we have a literary marketplace that openly commodifies
the racial ancestry of the Asian American writer as a way to authenticate the fictional world. In the space between the restrictions of the authorial native informant and the apolitical freedoms of the postrace artist, the writers at the center of this study imagine fictional worlds that push cultural critics to expand the scope and methodologies of their analyses. I next consider the ways that the field of Asian American cultural criticism has developed and further outline the unique interventions offered by my book.

The Rise of Asian American Literary Criticism

With the publication of Asian American writing gaining more steam throughout the mid-twentieth century, race and ethnic literary criticism began to surface in the 1970s. In the period following the civil rights movement, Asian Americans enjoyed widespread legislative inclusion for the first time. As ethnic minority histories and cultures gained more social visibility, questions arose as to why American literature syllabi so commonly lacked any representation from people of Asian descent. After all, had there not been Asian Americans living in the United States for more than a century? Had Asian Americans not already been publishing their works? These questions propelled writers such as Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong to put together Aiiiiieee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers (1974), one of the first works devoted to collecting Asian American literature as a panethnic grouping. The book’s foundational theorizations dovetailed with cultural nationalist discourses that favored domestic-centered narratives, racial resistance, and masculine perspectives, found in novels such as John Okada’s No-No Boy and Louis Chu’s Eat a Bowl of Tea (1961). At that time, Chin and the other editors limited the bounds of Asian American literature to works produced by three ethnic groups: Filipino Americans, Chinese Americans, and Japanese Americans. Any conflations among Asian American writer, narrator, and the fictional world did not necessarily pose an interpretive problem for these editors or for early critics, precisely because the initial project was heavily invested in the archiving of erased sociohistorical and cultural contexts. In other words, it was important in these initial stages to read these texts as forms of nonfictional documents, representational mirrors reflecting particular social inequalities experienced by Asian Americans and perhaps even the lives of the writers themselves, occasionally over and above the qualities of such writings as aesthetic creations.
Academics did not take up such literatures as the grounds for full-length book studies until Elaine H. Kim’s *Asian American Literature* in 1982. Kim was already grappling with the complexities of what constituted Asian American literature in her introduction by adding Korean Americans as an ethnic group to the taxonomy. As critics such as Kim, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, and Amy Ling wrestled with defining boundaries, the field underwent a significant metamorphosis, moving from the identity-politics model popularized under cultural nationalism to an analytical methodology influenced by fluidity, decenteredness, and poststructural and postmodern theories. Sunn Shelley Wong elucidates some of the changes to critical genealogies in her reading of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s mixed-genre text *Dictee* (1982). According to Wong, the cultural nationalist leanings of the field in its earliest period would have been incompatible with an interpretive apparatus equipped to consider the multifocal nature of Cha’s mixed-genre work (63). The “politics of difference” (63) certainly has propelled the scholarly field forward, especially in the way that it allows a host of different types of Asian American literary studies to negotiate the intersectional, fragmented, and comparative nature of racial identity. The entire field constellates around this foundational methodology: scholars make apparent what Lisa Lowe, building off Kim’s foundational book, calls the “heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity” (66) of Asian American lives, whether related to issues of gender, sexuality, class, diasporic trajectory, age, disability, generational dynamics, or psychic structures, among other such markers of difference and social rubrics.

The field is thus characterized by its commitment to examining Asian American racial formation from as many different perspectives and approaches as possible, so much so that the term “Asian American” often seems incoherent. Susan Koshy’s “The Fiction of Asian American Literature” clarifies these incongruities: “Asian American’ offers us a rubric that we cannot not use. But our usage of the term should rehearse the catachrestic status of the formation. I use the term ‘catachresis’ to indicate that there is no literal referent for the rubric ‘Asian American’ and, as such, the name is marked by the limits of its signifying power” (342). The “limits” of the “signifying power” can be seen in the litany of monographs that illuminate the inconsistencies that define Asian American literature, including but not limited to Viet Thanh Nguyen’s *Race and Resistance* (2002), Kandice Chuh’s *Imagine Otherwise* (2003), Tina Chen’s *Double Agency* (2005), and Christopher Lee’s *The Semblance of Identity* (2012).
Even with these many critical interventions, the field faces an incredible challenge with respect to theorizing what constitutes the Asian American fictional world. As the earlier example of Whiteman suggests, must the Asian American fictional world contain Asian American characters? Must it possess a narrator of Asian descent or a narrative perspective that primarily follows an Asian American character? Fortunately, a large number of recent book-length publications devoted to the study of Asian American literature, genre, aesthetics, and formal impulses tackle such conundrums. This book adds something new in its concentration on first-person fictional narratives in which the narrator’s and writer’s ethnoracial descent do not explicitly match. By focusing on the storyteller, we can push cultural critique rooted in race and ethnic studies in unpredictable directions and ultimately agitate for more interdisciplinary and syncretic analytical approaches. Rajini Srikanth argues that an autoethnographic reading practice “can insulate and isolate us from the very people among whom we wish to become more visible, from whom we desire greater understanding, and with whom we perhaps seek greater intimacy” (201). Such a call to reconsider South Asian American literatures informs my project, but I address the desire for “another kind of narrative” in relation to Asian American literature at large, considering those texts that take us to the “frontiers of our consciousness” (201). While Srikanth specifically directs her appeal to creative communities, she also pushes critics to challenge their analytical practices and to move out of the zone that requires Asian American cultural studies to be specifically formulated through Asian American subject matter (however that might be defined). The fictions I focus on lead us exactly into the “frontiers” of our consciousnesses as literary studies and ethnic studies scholars by questioning the place of the author in relation to the fictional world. What do these fictions tell us, not only about Asian American identity politics and culture but also about comparative subject positions, whether elucidated through ethnic, racial, or other social differences? Racial Asymmetries shows that the answer is bound up with the Asian American writer’s move to create storytelling perspectives that undermine an autobiographical or autoethnographic reading practice and, by doing so, to craft expansive possibilities for fictional worlds.

In this era of postracial conversations and viewpoints, Asian American cultural criticism stands at a fascinating crossroads. The critical methodologies employed by scholars within the field undoubtedly remain important to analyzing the representations of Asian Americans. At the same time, the deployment of strategic essentialism that constitutes the
field through a coalitional framework based on authorial descent and its connection to the representational landscape can, however unintentionally, marginalize fictions that do not focus only or specifically on Asian American experiences or contexts. Even as Asian American cultural criticism gains more visibility at the institutional level, it must remain ever vigilant to the ways that analytical inquiries should embrace the egalitarian ethos that characterized the field when it first emerged and cultivate more expansive interdisciplinary methodologies that can attend to the rich morphologies of fictional worlds.

**Giving Voices to Asian American Fictional Worlds**

The archive at the center of this book does beg the question of what makes such Asian American fiction *fictional*. Here, narratology provides a set of tools to advance my critical inquiries, as theorists have looked at narration as a site to consider how fiction operates in contradistinction to other genres more stringently tethered to external referents, such as historical studies and biographies. The narratologist Kalle Pihlainen reminds us that “in historical narratives . . . the viewpoint that we have is consistently that of the extradiegetic narrator—equatable, and indeed equated, with the author, the historian who has access to the material and who is critical toward the material as well as makes it clear to readers when he or she does not know something” (53). Pihlainen’s consideration of the writerly subject position has wider ramifications for the truth-telling characteristics of certain narrative forms such as life-writing, memoir, and autoethnography. Per Philippe Lejeune’s definition of the autobiography/memoir (5), the author’s name is synonymous with the narrator-character. Autobiographical and autoethnographic narration have similar valences, where the storyteller, extradiegetic or not, overlaps in some way with the author.

In contrast, fictional narration does not have the same constraints. Speaking of heterodiegetic narrators, Dorrit Cohn spotlights one element integral to fictionality: the narrator’s unobstructed access to characters’ minds, a process akin to telepathy: “This penetrative optic calls on devices—among others free indirect style—that remain unavailable to narrators who aim for referential (nonfictional) presentation” (*Distinction of Fiction* 16). I extend Cohn’s proposition beyond heterodiegetic narrators (typically third person) precisely because there are homodiegetic narratives (typically first person) that cannot be attached to an external referent (such as an actual person), and such narratives cannot
be placed in parallel with the author in the way that an autobiographical text, memoir, autoethnography, or historical study might. In other words, the “I” doing the narrating may be of an entirely different ancestral background than the writer, and in these cases, the author must imagine what this other constructed entity sees, thinks, and feels. The majority of narratives critiqued in *Racial Asymmetries* are told through the first-person mode, as the American writer of Asian descent employs the voice and narrative perspective of a character whose racial and ethnic background do not match his or her own. For writers, severing the link between the author and the narrator is part of an “exercise,” per Richard Walsh’s rhetorical theory of fiction, that enhances how the representational terrain can be read as make-believe (“Fictionality and Mimesis” 119). However, when the “tour guide function” collapses the Asian American author with certain narrators and with certain narrative perspectives and then commodifies this collapse, fictionality is imperiled.

Fully engaging Asian American fictionality requires a serious reconsideration of narrative perspective. By depicting the lives, viewpoints, emotions, thoughts, and voices of imaginary characters, Asian American fiction writers in this study create anthropomorphic storytellers who encourage cultural critics and readers to engage why the story is told from this particular perspective. Because we cannot assume that the writer is sympathetic to or identifies with the storyteller he or she constructs, we must analyze how the storyteller functions as one nodal point within a larger representational power matrix. With such great responsibilities given to the narrator who directs our access to the fictional world, other issues begin to emerge: which characters become central and which are placed at the peripheries, what historical circumstances frame the plot, and what spatial contexts ground the construction of fictionalized settings, to name a few. Here, the narrator’s telling of a story arcs out into a variety of concerns that must be considered to explore the extensive bounds of the novel’s racial asymmetries.

I use the phrase “racial asymmetries” to describe two interlocking levels of this book: the first to describe a particular phenomenon and the second to describe a critical reading practice. “Racial asymmetries” first describes the incongruities that emerge between the Asian American writer and narrative perspective, where the writer undermines the alignment between ethnoracial background and the narrator. This first level grants an explicit space for thinking about Asian American literature through its fictional qualities, as a writer’s ancestry does not directly mirror that of the narrator’s. The first-person storyteller is an imagined
life, one that might have existed but actually does not and should not be assumed to be the double for the Asian American author.

In this way, the fictional landscape is bound up with the second level of racial asymmetry, which involves the aesthetics and the politics engaged within and offered by the representational terrain. Racial Asymmetries thus finds traction at the complex juncture between fiction and nonfiction. On the one hand, Asian American writers enhance the imaginative aspects of their creative publications by locating narrative perspective in characters whose ethnoracial backgrounds differ from their own. On the other, these characters travel through a fictional world enmeshed in larger social contexts and historical frameworks. These characters thus find their individual lives entangled amid structural inequalities, such as colonial conquest, class immobility, racial oppression, sexism, and homophobia, among other systemic issues. Asian Americanist critique offers a unique intervention at this intersection because the field has been so highly influenced by historicist and materialist analytical methodologies. As I attend to the dynamics of narrative perspective, I also employ the data and research offered by many disciplines, including history, anthropology, sociology, urban studies, and American race and ethnic studies, to closely examine the fictional world’s complex relationship with external referents. While this book clearly pushes the Asian Americanist critique into radically new territories, it also parallels developing scholarly trends within cultural studies. Here, I refer to calls to make American studies increasingly intersectional, whether through the framework of globalization, hemispheric approaches, or analytics of comparative race and ethnicity.

Charting Our Racially Asymmetrical Course

I begin my study with texts that reflect some of the more traditional concerns of the field but move increasingly toward those that seem to have little to do with Asian American racial formation. Chapter 1 explores how Asian American-ness might be structured in relation to the psychic interiority of a white narrator. I focus my reading on Chang-rae Lee’s *Aloft*, in which the Italian American narrator disrupts any clear overlap between author and narrative perspective. The novel attends to the racial asymmetries of Asian American fiction by forefronting how a white narrator perceives the issue of racial difference as it unfolds in an exclusive Long Island community. In chapter 2, I shift from analyzing a white storytelling perspective to a Chicano viewpoint. In Sesshu Foster’s
Atomik Aztex, the narrative models how a Chicano narrator comes to terms with a broadened class consciousness, one that involves a multiracial union of his slaughterhouse-factory workers. Foster also employs a speculative alternate reality that becomes a useful analogy to convey the Chicano subject’s fractured self, as a political organizer and social activist as well as a potential agent of destruction.

The second half of the book focuses on writers whom critics have almost completely ignored because their fiction remains difficult to categorize. While Sigrid Nunez’s first novel, A Feather on the Breath of God (1995), contains clear autobiographical valences, two subsequent publications do not. Chapter 3 critiques Nunez’s For Rouenna and The Last of Her Kind, both of which complicate any clear link between the author’s ethnoracial background and the novels’ protagonists. But this chapter progresses the book further by emphasizing the process of narrative construction. In each novel, the storyteller is an individual who looks to reconstruct the life of another character but in the process calls attention to other individuals on the peripheries and pushes the biographical form to expand. Though neither novel employs the narrative perspective of an Asian American character, each shows measured attention to pressing social issues, whether related to the plight of female veterans who fought in the Vietnam War or the failures of the American prison system.

Directing Racial Asymmetries to its most transnational dimensions, chapter 4 investigates a selection of Sabina Murray’s publications, concentrating on A Carnivore’s Inquiry and Forgery. The narrators of these cultural productions open up perspectives that convey how violence and brutality advance various colonial projects. They trace the paths of international conquest through various countries—the United States, Mexico, Spain, the Philippines, Greece—and, in this regard, illuminate racial formation as a comparative colonial construct. The final chapter explores the ways two speculative fictions function through racial analogies. Claire Light’s “Abducted by Aliens!” and Ted Chiang’s The Merchant and the Alchemist’s Gate, though narrated by characters who exist in fantastical landscapes filled with alchemy, time traveling, or alien invaders, can be interpreted through their oblique relationship to external social contexts and historical archives. “Abducted by Aliens!” demonstrates how the alien-abduction narrative can be analogized to the experience of Japanese American internees, while Chiang’s novella shows how an oriental tale set in the Islamic Golden Age can be analogized to American foreign policy in the post-9/11 era. Both works provide dramatic examples of the Asian American writer who makes
imaginative use of narrative perspective but whose fictional worlds can be firmly tethered to material and historical contexts.

Though this study primarily focuses on a select number of fictions, another aim is to cast light on the larger archive of works penned by Asian American writers in which narrative perspective and its connection to authorial ancestry cannot be clearly linked. In this respect, *Racial Asymmetries* seeks not only to supplement the critical methodologies that we employ in the analysis of Asian American cultural studies but also to complicate and to expand the kinds of social contexts and historical circumstances that characterize the field as it continues to burgeon in the new millennium. In this process, we find that an incredible multitude of subjects and storytellers constitute this so-called subfield of literary study, thus revealing the elastic bounds of the fictional world.