

*Research on Diversity in Youth Literature*

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**Mathison, Ymitri, ed. *Growing Up Asian American in Young Adult Fiction*. University Press of Mississippi, 2019. 248 pages. ISBN: 9781496825520.**

**Noreen N. Rodríguez**

*Iowa State University*

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Review by Noreen Naseem Rodríguez, Iowa State University

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While Asian American children's literature has long been relegated to the sidelines in libraries and classrooms, recent years have marked notable national recognition through the American Library Association's Newbery Medal, awarded annually for the most distinguished children's book published each year and one of the highest honors in children's literature. In 2018, Filipina American Erin Entrada Kelly's *Hello, Universe* received the Newbery Award. The next year, Indian American Veera Hiranandani won the Newbery Honor for *The Night Diary*. In 2021, Kelly and Thai American Christina Soontornvat received Newbery Honors while the Newbery Award went to Korean American Tae Keller. Never before have so many Asian American authors been honored in a single year on the national stage. At long last, Asian American young adult and middle grade fiction is receiving major accolades and is firmly becoming a part of the literary mainstream.

The predecessors to these aforementioned award-winning books receive in-depth attention and analysis in *Growing Up Asian American in Young Adult Fiction*. This edited volume includes ten chapters that illustrate the range and complexity of Asian American ethnicities as depicted in young adult fiction, from historical fiction about refugees and Japanese American wartime incarceration to contemporary stories of South Asian youth post-9/11, transnational adoption, and bildungsromans with bi/multiracial protagonists. Editor Ymitri Mathison describes this collection as going "beyond the stereotypes that Asian American children and adolescents face in society" (3), as chapter authors explore the multiple interstitial spaces that Asian Americans occupy by examining how the various Asian American adolescent characters construct their identities within, and often against, mainstream white American culture. As first- and second-generation Asian American immigrant experiences—particularly among the working class—are often a far cry from the white, middle-class suburban life idealized

in the Eurocentric bildungsroman, several authors analyze texts specifically in relation to the traditional bildungsroman plot. The representations found in these young adult fiction books centered around Asian American protagonists range widely, and are frequently problematized in terms of the authors' ethnoracial identity to illustrate the significance of #OwnVoices in the depictions of those whose identities are on the margins of mainstream society.

One of the volume's greatest strengths is the variety of books that are analyzed. The first two chapters by Tomo Hattori and Mary J. Henderson Couzelis analyze Asian American representation in graphic novels and comics, while Jennifer Ho explores ambiguity in Linda Barry's *One Hundred Demons* – not a traditional graphic novel, but decidedly graphic in form. Hattori focuses on two graphic novels by acclaimed Chinese American author and illustrator Gene Luen Yang: *American Born Chinese*, arguably one of the only Asian American graphic novels to be used widely in U.S. high schools and colleges in the last decade, and *Level Up*. Couzelis also analyzes *American Born Chinese* in addition to the graphic novel *Good as Lily* and juxtaposes these graphic novels with the “Girl Power” and “You Are What You Eat” comics in *Secret Identities: The Asian American Superhero Anthology*. Hattori and Couzelis offer contrasting perspectives on the role of the graphic novel. While Hattori showcases Yang's work as evidence of the graphic novel medium's potential to resist stereotypes through its sequential panels, Couzelis argues that the graphic genre “reflects a long tradition of white male privilege” (41), particularly in terms of the depiction of women, and uses gender as a lens to examine the intersection of racist stereotypes and female objectification. Couzelis' gender analysis interrogates how much progress graphic novels have actually achieved for Asian American female readers and is an important reminder that the multiple oppressions faced by Asian Americans must be teased out. Ho adds further nuance to the possibilities of illustrated fiction by centering the productive ways ambiguity can push readers to explore the porosity of imagined boundaries and attend to the ambiguity and hybridity faced by many mixed race and Asian American individuals.

Chapters by Linda Pierce Allen, Sarah Park Dahlen, Lan Dong, and Leah Milne add further complexity to ideas of ethnoracial belonging. Allen establishes the traditional bildungsroman as xenophobic at its foundation, employing the mixed race Filipino American protagonists in the novel *American Son* to illustrate the subgenre of the ethnic bildungsroman, which refuses Western linear models of progression. Rather than failing to come of age into

white normativity, Allen contends that as former colonial subjects, Filipino Americans may refuse “to adhere to a Western standard of maturation” (82), and such lack of closure is an essential component of the Filipino American bildungsroman and its struggle with and against assimilation into whiteness. Dahlen explores a different tension: birth searching among transnationally adopted Koreans. Dahlen establishes the global geopolitical context in which transnational adoption occurs, deftly weaving textual analysis with a historicization of Korean transnational adoption and her own research on birth-searching experiences. While on the surface Allen and Dahlen’s chapters seem unrelated, both authors analyze their selected texts with an emphasis on systemic, social, and institutional barriers while attending to individual agency regarding cultural and racial self-identification. Dong’s chapter focuses on how Vietnamese American interstitiality is manifested in food and fusion practices as protagonists search for their identity. With *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*, Dong explores how the character Bich’s struggle with food is closely tied to her relationships with multiple maternal figures; the complexity Bich faces in regard to motherhood is echoed in the texts Dahlen analyzes in terms of the labeling and naming of mothers. Relatedly, Milne’s analysis examines lost and absent mothers in *Name Me Nobody* and *Blu’s Hanging*. Dahlen and Milne’s work also coincides as they address (hi)stories left untold and the sense of alienation experienced by various protagonists as a result of those omissions.

In addition to complicated family dynamics, racism and stereotypes often appear in coming-of-age young adult fiction, and multiple chapters examine the impact of ethnoracial discrimination on Asian American protagonists. Hattori explores Yang’s attention to the model minority stereotype (which emerged during the Cold War and has been fiercely associated with Asian American immigrants ever since), examining the internal racism Asian Americans have against themselves in a Eurocentric white society and the external racism they suffer from dominant society. Hattori notes that “reproducing stereotypes is central to Yang’s strategy of eviscerating them from the structure of Asian American consciousness” (27), as these stereotypes must be recognized before they can be dismantled. Hena Ahmad’s chapter addresses the Islamophobia faced by South Asian communities post-9/11, including the racialization of Islam and the unique ways South Asian Americans encounter the model minority stereotype that are distinct from their East Asian American counterparts. Ahmad’s analysis includes an interrogation of “brownness” and how notions of belonging differ among first-generation

immigrants, who Ahmad argues are more grounded in their “brown” identity, and second-generation U.S.-born South Asian Americans, who may experience their cultural and racial differences within the hegemonic culture more acutely. In spite of these distinctions, members of both generations may be viewed as perpetual foreigners, another stereotype commonly experienced by Asian Americans. These chapters make evident the ways whiteness is equated with Americanness, and how Asian American youth often struggle to belong in a world that constantly views them as exotic Others.

Traise Yamamoto’s chapter takes up notions of Americanness through the lens of citizenship in an analysis of six middle grade and young adult texts about Japanese American incarceration during World War II. Yamamoto understands citizenship as both affective and juridical, noting how children’s literature often deploys affective citizenship to invoke empathy from the reader, using friendships with non-Japanese Americans who are not imprisoned as a metaphor for citizenship. However, Yamamoto argues that such emphasis on affect leaves juridical issues by the wayside, and therefore the Constitutional violations and dehumanizing treatment of Japanese Americans is often given scant attention in books about their incarceration. Therefore, Yamamoto examines how juridical issues of U.S. citizenship are either subordinated or foregrounded in young adult books featuring interracial friendships.

Lastly, Joy Takako Taylor’s chapter considers the tourist gaze in two American Girl books about the Hawaiian/Japanese/German character Kanani Akina. Taylor observes the use of the tourist gaze and a romanticization of the past as a common theme across all books in the American Girl series and articulates how Asian American author Lisa Yee offers readers an idyllic depiction of Hawai’i as a multicultural paradise that ultimately prioritizes the white settler gaze. Moreover, Taylor reminds readers that Hawaiian lands, culture, and people have also been adversely impacted by Asian settlers, and that Asian American and Hawaiian identities may overlap at times but may also need to be disentangled. Taylor’s chapter ends the volume by calling on the Asian diaspora to consider their role in the colonizer-oppressor binary. Ultimately, what does it mean to be both colonizer and colonized?

This edited volume is undoubtedly a notable contribution to the extant research on Asian American young adult literature, although it is worth noting that two chapters also include middle grade novels (*Sylvia and Aki* by Winifred Conkling and *Inside Out and Back Again* by Thanhha Lai) and several chapters do not explain why the focal books were chosen.

Additionally, many of the selected texts feature mixed race Asian Americans. There are, however, some issues around language that are concerning. First, Mathison uses the dehumanizing phrase “illegal immigration” in the introduction despite later mentioning undocumented Filipino American journalist Jose Antonio Vargas, who has argued ardently against the use of that very phrase. Additionally, Mathison frequently uses “Asian” in lieu of “Asian American” in describing Asian American experiences; although a cursory discussion of Asian American identity and representation in children’s literature is included, at no point is the political history of the term Asian American explored. This history is deeply important, as the term emerged as a self-identifier from a coalition of Chinese American, Japanese American, and Filipino American college students who sought a way to unify themselves through a new political identity based on empowerment (Ishizuka). A volume dedicated to Asian American fiction should explore the sociopolitical origins of the term, particularly since this history is rarely acknowledged in the mainstream and may be unknown to readers.

Second, the title describes the collection as one of Asian American young adult fiction, excluding Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders. The clustering of Pacific Islanders and Native Hawaiians with Asian Americans has historically been superficial at best and deeply harmful and disenfranchising at worst. According to Diaz, “under no circumstance should Pacific Islanders, or Pacific Islands Studies, be subsumed under the institutional framework of Asian American history and experiences” (184). The two fields of study emphasize distinct historical and political struggles, and central to Pacific Islanders and Native Hawaiians are their Indigenous histories and experiences before, against, and beyond the United States and the American imperial project. Although this edited collection includes two thought-provoking chapters by Leah Milne and Joy Takako Taylor about books set in Hawai’i, the book title fails to include Native Hawaiians. Fortunately, Taylor’s chapter begins with a pointed critique of the misrepresentation of Pacific Islanders and Native Hawaiians in literature, and Milne’s chapter ends by noting “the need to focus on local (Hawaiian) experiences even as we acknowledge the ways that Hawaiian literature as a whole must be considered separately from its Asian American counterparts” (202). Nonetheless, the exclusionary title of this collection may dissuade readers who might be interested in these topics. Otherwise, this volume offers readers an unprecedented cross-section of analyses of Asian American experiences found in young adult fiction.

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