

If eating . . . is imprisonment, self-starvation seems to represent the extirpation of the other from the self. Yet starving also keeps the other *in* and fortifies the stronghold of the ego, lest the ghosts within the self should break out of their tomb. (95)

Maud Ellmann's text will be significant within the growing library of work concerning anorexia nervosa, because of its rigour and spirit of intellectual adventure, its delving into class and Irish nationalist difference from English hegemony, its reconfiguration of the parameters of self-help, its positing of selfhood in relationship to words and food, and its construction and politicization of the intrinsic social relationships between words and food.

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Wong, Sau-ling Cynthia. *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1993. pp. x, 258. \$15.95 pb.

It eludes no literary scholar's observation that in recent years the interest in ethnic/minority literature has increased dramatically. Among recent attempts to offer a general approach to Asian American literature, Cynthia Sau-ling Wong's study counts as one of the most extensive and insightful contributions. Drawing on various works on culture, minority discourses, and critical theory, Wong presents an erudite and elegant account of Asian American literature, spanning texts as diverse as Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart*, Frank Chin's *The Year of the Dragon*, Hisaye Yamamoto's *Seventeen Syllables*, and Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (of Canada). Wide ranging in its scope, Wong's book addresses a variety of critical, political, and aesthetic concerns and thus functions as a very useful road map for the beginning student of Asian American literature while providing a concise source of reference for specialists in the field.

In her well-documented study, Wong first outlines the exact field of her research: she aims at a "thematic study of Asian American literature. But perhaps even more important, it is a book about the reading of Asian American literature as a critical project within the academy" (3). As Asian American literature has gained increasing recognition, the fundamental question of "how Asian American literature is to be read" also arises (4). Although Asian American literature figures prominently in recent critical scholarship, most critics have had little to say about it as literature, stressing instead its political and sociological context. Wong, however, in her sophisticated analysis based on close reading, argues that Asian American literature demands—and rewards—attention to questions of *intertextual* as well as *contextual* readings. The intertextuality of Asian American literature is estab-

lished in Wong's book through a careful explication of four themes—eating/alimentary images, the double/*Doppelgänger*, mobility/immobility, and play/*homo ludens*. Two rhetorical figures from Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, "Necessity" and "Extravagance," further clarify and develop this original investigation. "The terms *Necessity* and *Extravagance* signify two contrasting modes of existence and operation," Wong writes, "one contained, survival-driven and conservation-minded, the other attracted to freedom, excess, emotional expressiveness, and autotelism. All four motifs studied can be related to these modes" (13).

In Chapter One, which is devoted to the theme of eating, Wong marshals a wide range of material to argue that the images of "big eaters" and "treat lovers" characterize Asian American literature. Wong painstakingly draws together a number of evidential strings to explain how Asian American writers use alimentary images to explore issues of economic and cultural survival. "It is my contention," Wong argues, "that alimentary images, thus juxtaposed and read as a group, symbolize Necessity—all the hardships, deprivations, restrictions, disenfranchisements, and dislocations that Asian Americans have collectively suffered as immigrants and minorities in a white-dominated country" (20). Wong identifies three major sets of alimentary motifs in Asian American literature: "big eating," "food prostitution," and "food pornography," asserting that the eating image could be invested with profound significance within a sociohistorical context. The strengths of Wong's argument lie in her detailed documentation and her focus on the unsettling implications of "eating ethnic" in American culture. In addition, Wong's examination of the ways in which the eating theme is incorporated in a variety of works by Asian American writers is perceptive.

After laying down the foundations concerning the basic polarity of Necessity-versus-Extravagance in her lengthy discussion of the theme of eating, Wong goes on to the difficult field of how to read the "universal" theme of "the double" in Asian American literature. Chapter Two, entitled "Encounters with the Racial Shadow," deals with a Western, rather than an Oriental, motif of the *Doppelgänger*, first identified in European literature. However, Wong moves beyond traditional methods of psychological analysis by establishing a "racially linked subtype" of the double figure that "confirms the need for a more rigorous revision of traditional theories of the double, in the direction of greater sociopolitical emphasis" (92). The point that Wong tries to make is that "in Asian American literature, depoliticization of the double is less fully veiled, and historical contextualization much more essential to profitable reading, than in Western 'mainstream' literature" (114). Wong's most original contribution to our knowledge of the *Doppelgänger* does not lie in her theoretical explication but in her

detailed description of Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, which, supported by her knowledge of new historicism, produces a convincing example of profitable reading of the "racial shadow" in Asian American literature.

For some readers, Wong's discussion of the theme of (im)mobility will open lines of inquiry into why the "mainstream" myths of unfettered mobility, "a key component in American ideology, do not apply to Asian Americans" (12). One of the most important observations that Wong makes in Chapter Three is an enlightening paradox: "Asian American literature, from its very inception, has also been 'a literature of movement, of motion'"; yet "the Asian American has been conspicuously absent in existing generalist formulations of a presumably universally applicable theory of American mobility" (119). After a careful comparison of mainstream and Asian American discourses on mobility, Wong concludes:

In the former, horizontal movement across the North American continent regularly connotes independence, freedom, an opportunity for individual actualization and/or societal renewal—in short, Extravagance. In the latter, however, it is usually associated with subjugation, coercion, impossibility of fulfilment for self or community—in short, Necessity. (121)

The logic of the argument and the appropriateness of its illustration make it impossible for anyone to argue against Wong's conclusion. From both a rhetorical and substantive point of view, her figural use of the terms "Necessity" and "Extravagance" adds extra persuasiveness to her argument.

The most exciting—and hitherto probably the least exhausted—topic about Asian American literature is to be found in Chapter Four, "The Asian American *Homo Ludens*." Even a cursory survey of Asian American literature enables us to see that a large number of works by Asian American authors explore the idea of art as playful act. Wong's research, however, does not focus on the playful art itself, but on its "social origin." The questions that Wong attempts to answer in her discussion are "to what can we attribute such images of art?" and "to what extent has the race of the artist—together with the historical experience it entails—entered into their formulation?" (166). In Wong's opinion, "even those Asian American authors most drawn to images of free play have never lost sight of the issues of utility and community: that at heart their 'disinterestedness' is always 'interested,' their 'purposelessness' always 'purposive'" (209). The author denounces the theory of narcissistic *Homo Ludens*, as she claims, echoing the Jamesian idea of the political unconscious, a "political function" of Asian American *Homo Ludens*: "at this juncture in history, the seemingly apolitical advancement of play by Asian American artists serves a political function: it subverts white society's expectations of the Asian American's proper place and stimulates the creation of a heteroglossic Asian Am-

erican culture" (210). Consistently impressive, Wong's choice of works in this chapter is ingenious and suggestive; in all of these works she discovers serious complexities beneath the playful surface. Her conclusion is a valuable argument for ethnicity as an essential, generative force in Asian American literature.

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