
Contesting Genres in Contemporary Asian American Literature. Betsy Huang. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. viii + 184 pages. \$75.00 cloth.

Literary critics have generally treated so-called “genre fiction”—romances, mysteries, science-fiction epics—with contempt. As recently as 2003, Sven Birkerts wrote in a review of Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003) that science fiction “will never be literature with a capital L.” What this judgment overlooks is the increasing academic attention to popular genres. Courses in science fiction and fantasy literature can now be found in college curricula, and genre writing has seen a number of its practitioners elevated to the realm of capital-L literature, as in the inclusion of Raymond Chandler and Philip K. Dick in the Library of America series.

As Betsy Huang observes in *Contesting Genres in Contemporary Asian American Literature*, one realm in which this new interest in genre fiction has not been felt is the study of Asian American literature. This engaging, wide-ranging book places Huang at the forefront of a younger generation of scholars exploring Asian American uses of popular genres. Huang makes a powerful case that generic form, just as much as narrative content, may be a site of social struggle in a work of Asian American literature.

Huang follows other scholars in arguing that Asian American literary studies has at times been characterized by a myopic focus on narratives of immigration, assimilation, and social protest. Huang’s innovation is to see the immigrant narrative not just as a story but as a genre—a set of conventions that makes Asian American stories legible to a wider audience, but that can also limit and domesticate Asian American writing. Seeing Asian American immigrant stories as genre fiction shifts our attention to the regulatory power of literary conventions. “Asian American writing,” Huang asserts, “is rarely *sui generis*, but always expected to be *generic*, its worth measured by how capably the writer executes the essential elements of the expected immigrant narrative” (12).

With an awareness of the prescriptive power of genre comes a corresponding sense of genre itself as a terrain of political struggle. In Huang’s

analysis, “the political impact of a work—whether resistant, accommodationist, or ambivalent—is ultimately located in the author’s negotiations with the conventions he or she is expected to execute” (5). Huang thus focuses on authors who self-consciously employ, subvert, or parody popular genres, demonstrating what she calls the “transformative power of genre experimentation” (5). Genre, Huang argues, helps constitute the stories we tell about Asian American subjects, forming a political groundwork that must be examined if we are to challenge prescriptive limits on Asian American agency. As Huang succinctly puts it, “Genres organize stories, and stories organize identity” (146).

After showing how the immigrant fictions of lê thi diem thúy and Chang-rae Lee deconstruct narratives of assimilation and the model minority, Huang turns her attention to crime fiction, which has generally used Asians as stereotypical objects, from Charlie Chan to sinister Chinatowns. Huang finds in Wayne Wang’s film *Chan Is Missing* (1982), Ed Lin’s *This Is a Bust* (2007), and Susan Choi’s *American Woman* (2003) work that “metacritically challenges the genre’s racist and Orientalist histories through self-reflexive narrative strategies,” showing that “the only way to diffuse the iconic power of honorable Chan and sinister Chinatown is to return to the constitutive source—namely, the genre that produced them” (59).

Perhaps the most exciting chapter in the book is Huang’s treatment of science fiction, which exemplifies both the regulatory force of popular genres and their potential for radical, destabilizing innovation. Like crime fiction, science fiction has a “long Orientalist history” (95), from nineteenth-century figurations of “machine-like” Chinese workers to the Asian philosophies evoked by Philip K. Dick and Ursula K. Le Guin. Nonetheless, Huang argues that “science fiction affords Asian American writers a unique way to engage in subversive political and ideological critique not by contravening genre conventions, but by using them to rewrite the rules of the genre” (101). She links this power to the central paradox of science fiction, the “conflict between its subversive politics and its highly conventionalized narrative forms” (100)—making it the ideal arena for an investigation of how Asian Americans might challenge prescriptive norms of identity formation.

In the work of Ted Chiang, Greg Pak, and Cynthia Kadohata, Huang identifies a spectrum of Asian American acceptance of and resistance to generic conventions. Chiang’s “progressive views of alterity” (110) are ultimately hemmed in by a reverence for the genre’s conventions, stopping short of a direct confrontation with race. The short films of Pak’s *Robot Stories* (2003) use the familiar science fiction trope of the robot for

a “‘back door’ didacticism” (114) that examines and critiques the parallels between the robot and the Asian American model-minority subject, and the critical dystopia of Kadohata’s *In the Heart of the Valley of Love* (1992) places the literature of social protest in a new, futuristic context that “maintain[s] the delicate balance between hope and pessimism” (140). In Huang’s rich readings, these works of Asian American science fiction display a dialectic in which “science fiction can retool Asian American literary aesthetics” at the same time that Asian American writers “regene[r]” science fiction through their critical interventions and revisions (101).

On Chang-rae Lee’s *Native Speaker* (1995), Huang offers a devastatingly incisive take on the downfall of John Kwang, the book’s Korean American politician: unable to counter media narratives of himself as a “hubristic rising politician” and “immigrant interloper,” Kwang becomes a “victim of the genres that propagate such types” (141). The idea that an individual can become a “victim of genre” powerfully displays the political stakes and the critical potential of Huang’s work. By reading genre as a realm of Asian American political struggle, Huang opens up Asian American literary studies to a new realm of engagement with the popular, in which the risks of accommodation to mass-culture conventions are paired with a power to rewrite the narrative frameworks of Asian American identity.

Timothy Yu

University of Wisconsin