

**Phillipa Kafka. *(Un)Doing the Missionary Position: Gender Asymmetry in Contemporary Asian American Women's Writing*. Contributions in Women's Studies Series, No. 158. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997). xix, 216 pp., \$55.00 cloth.**

Phillipa Kafka's clever book title turns on her deconstruction of what she sees as a simultaneous patriarchal and racist orientation of some contemporary literary criticism, akin to the unquestioned, naturalized supremacy presumed by agents of political imperialism such as missionaries. By focusing on what she sees as feminist and postfeminist writing by contemporary Asian American women authors—specifically, their attention to gender asymmetry—she demonstrates that we can read these works as a collective strike against the sexism of much (male) postcolonial, Marxist, and deconstructionist criticism and the racism of much (white) feminist criticism. Her readings of Amy Tan, Fae Myenne Ng, Gish Jen, R. A. Sasaki, and Cynthia Kadohata represent a provocative, new framework for understanding recent literature by Asian American women.

Kafka links the work of her subjects along seven themes, the most significant are “syncretism” (in which characters, in response to gender asymmetry, forge elements of two cultures to empower themselves); “paradox” (incorporation of “ambivalence and polyvocality” [6]); “unreliable narrators and inconsistent characters” (undermining authority by presenting problematic narrators and characters); and “revisiting the past.” By making these thematic linkages, she provides a useful and illuminating framework for scholars and teachers facing the increasingly diverse and complex body of Asian American literature.

The book's greatest contribution lies in its analysis of multiple responses among Asian American female characters to gender asymmetry—the unequal social relations along gender lines—which belie the notion that Asian American women share a single perspective. Pearl, a Chinese American character in Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife*, for example, represents a bridge between characters and between cultures, a syncretism that challenges the dated but stubborn East/West binary. In Jen's *Typical American*, the female characters, not the men, reach Confucian “equilibrium and balance” (109) through cultural syncretism. The Issei mother who dominates *The Loom and Other Stories* by R. A. Sasaki, by contrast, internalizes so completely the unquestioned gender asymmetry of two cultures that, only through flashbacks and without the understanding of her postfeminist daughters, the reader learns of the incremental dispiriting of a formerly courageous child accomplished by repeated episodes of gender oppression. Sasaki thus critiques gender asymmetry by way of the reader rather than that of a character or set of characters. Kafka's readings of Ng's *Bone* and Cynthia Kadohata's *The Floating World* are similarly insightful, especially as she contrasts fe-

male characters' respectively feminist and postfeminist responses to gender asymmetry.

Clear and ambitious, Kafka's book engenders (as it were) reconsiderations of Asian American women's writing vis-a-vis gender. It understandably says little about race itself in that it focuses on gender; it surprisingly says little about cultural differences between the Asian American ethnic groups it discusses (Chinese American and Japanese American). Nonetheless, by complicating the often oversimplified and sometimes wholly overlooked multiple ways that gender asymmetry is depicted by Asian American women writers, Kafka's book—which includes endnotes, a list of works cited, and an index that are nicely arranged and useful—provides an illuminating, new perspective.

David Goldstein-Shirley  
University of Washington

**Wahneema Lubiano, ed. *The House that Race Built: Black Americans, U.S. Terrain.* (New York: Random House, 1997). 323 pp., \$26.00 cloth, \$14.00 paper.**

*The House that Race Built* is a fascinating account of race and racism upon the terrain of United States' culture in the 1990s. Seventeen scholars, brought together at a Race Matters Conference at Princeton University, produced various essays and were evidently given plenty of leeway by the book's editor, Wahneema Lubiano. Various disciplines of law, history, sociology, fine arts, ethnic studies, literature, divinity, and politics are represented. Contributors addressed issues ranging from homosexuality, affirmative action, O.J. Simpson and religion, to perspectives on work vis-a-vis play, culture, Black Nationalism, whiteness, crime, and the black diaspora. A common denominator, in my view, was the theme from Cornel West's perspective that race matters. The conference took its name from his work.

Stephen Steinberg mounted an impressive and passionate attack on the liberal retreat during the decades following the modern black-led Civil Rights Movement. Similar to Todd Gitlin's *The Twilight of Common Dreams* or Herbert J. Gans' *The War Against the Poor*, Steinberg took no prisoners in his analysis of a right-wing backlash to the social turbulence of the 1980s-1990s, and more specifically, the left's and/or liberal establishment's lack of a proper response. Particular issue is taken with West's perspective on "nihilism" expressed in *Race Matters*. Steinberg sees it as an inappropriate descriptor and reaction to black inner-city crime and youth violence. Similarly, Gitlin reported how "culture war" infighting allowed the Religious Right to gain a moral and political high-ground during the 1990s, and Gans articulated how academics (and others) permitted a war to be waged against the so-called