

The cultural production of Asian American young adults in the novels of Marie G. Lee, An Na, and Doris Jones Yang.

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The Cultural Production of Asian American Young Adults in the Novels of Marie G. Lee, An Na, and Doris Jones Yang

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The Lion and the Unicorn

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 30, Number 2, April 2006

pp. 168-184

10.1353/uni.2006.0017

ARTICLE

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Abstract

This essay explores how the production of social subjectivities in these novels is related to the books' production processes and marketing, both suggesting a capitulation to a dominant order. A concentration on curricular ethnic inclusion or on making profits from an audience desiring stereotypical tales about ethnic difference comes at the expense of more interesting elements in fiction, such as narrative form and complex characterization.



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[T]he reading of ethnic literature can be seen to set a stage for the performance of difference—race relations are made manageable and students are able to “relate” to diverse and highly differentiated experiences by reducing difference to individual encounters via ethnic “texts”; this is, complex differences crosshatched by gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and so on, are subordinated to the general category of experience of the unfamiliar. The point of such readings of ethnic literature is therefore to “understand” the difference as a general phenomenon and subsume it under other categories that do not radically obstruct the smooth functioning of social apparatuses.

—David Palumbo-Liu, *The Ethnic Canon*

[M]ost adolescent novels . . . invariably reflect some cultural biases, most of which are likely to be veiled in ideological discourses that affirm widely held societal views. . . . they tend to convey to adolescents that they are better served by accepting than by rejecting the social institutions with which they must live. In that sense, the underlying agenda of many YA [young adult] novels is to indoctrinate adolescents into a measure of social acceptance.

—Roberta Seelinger Trites, *Disturbing the Universe*

Local libraries and bookstores boast growing collections of young adult novels by and about Asian Americans. When I began to read them, I found that although some Asian American authors employ a seeming literary dismantling of cultural typing (by challenging stereotypes or by creating unique ethnic or raced characters), these types are too often replaced by the cultural production and maintenance of similar ideologies. David



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